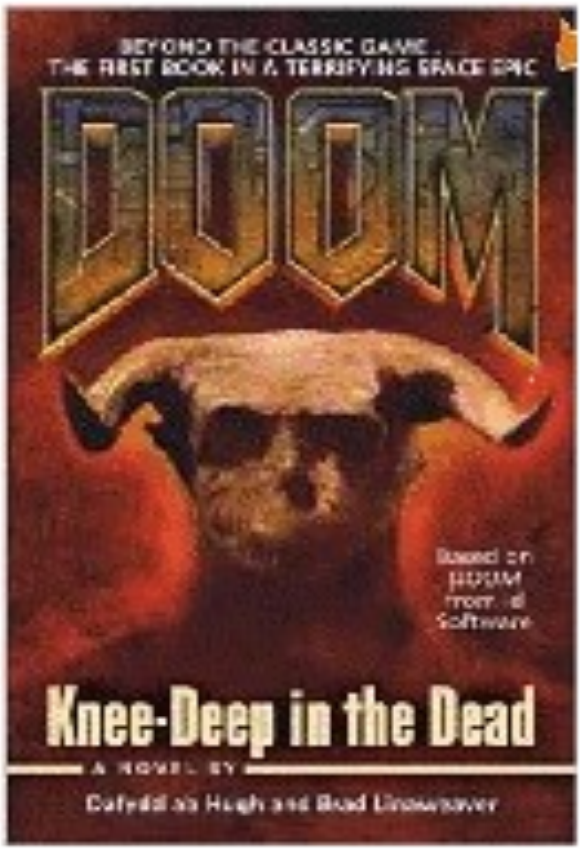

Doom

Knee Deep in the Dead

(The first book in the Doom series)

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Before the Beginning

Kefiristan is about as close as you can come to hell on Earth.

I say that with authority: I've spent the last eighteen months doing a tour here, trying to keep the Kefiri People's Liberation Army, who call themselves the "Scythe of Glory," from the throats of the rightist Khorastisti, who have the backing of Azeri transplants from the south (who want to keep their enclaves), who are fighting a "dirty war" against Communist Cuban and Peruvian meres . . . Jeez, you get the picture. It's a snarled skein of a million bloody threads up here on the top of the world, in the northern extension of the Karakoram range, between Afghanistan and Samarkand, Uzbekistan.

We'd just punched through the craggy pass pleasantly known as the "torn hymen" in the local tongue and come across the small, Muslim city of pik Nizganij, perched on a mountain peak of 2200 meters.

I stared in horror. Even eighteen months of picking up after the Scythe of Glory and their Shining Path buddies didn't prepare me for what was left of pik Nizganij.

It was a Bosch canvas, severed limbs and hollowed-out trunks—eaten out by animals, I prayed—planted through the fields like stalks of corn, blood painting doors and walls like the first Passover... except it was human blood, not lamb's blood.

Corporal Flynn Taggart, Fox Company, 15th Light Drop Infantry Regiment, United States Marine Corps; 888-23-9912. Everyone calls me Fly, except when they're pissed.

Fox crept through the town, hell-shocked, trying without much success to count body parts and make a reasonable K1A guess. Fog or an evil cloud rolled across the mountaintop, shrouding the sprightly red decoration and muffling our footsteps. It was like we walked along a cotton corridor, tripping over gruesome reminders that war, especially the virulent hatred of one tribe for another, throws men back into pre-bronze, pre-agricultural savagery. I wondered how many victims were killed by the victors' bare hands.

Something moved in the mist.

A shadow, a shape; nothing more. Gunnery Sergeant

Goforth froze us with a slight hiss... Fox is damn-well trained, even for the Light Drop.

Gates stopped next to me; he touched my arm, silently pointing to left and right. I saw immediately; whatever the shapes were, they surrounded us from eight o'clock to four o'clock... we might be able to retreat, but we couldn't flank.

I watched the gunny; Arlene Sanders was whispering something in his ear. She was our scout, the lightest of the Light Drop. PFC Sanders could fade into the night so not even a werewolf could sniff her out. My best buddy.

She might have been more; once, we had—no; we were buddies. We didn't talk about that night. Anyway, she had Dodd, and I don't separate bookends.

Arlene backed away, backed past me, throwing me a wink as she vanished. She would swing in a wide arc, ease around behind the still-moving shades, and report back to the lieutenant and Gunny Goforth via a secured line. I'd find out soon enough.

I hadn't moved, and neither had the rest of us; I could barely hear Bill breathing next to me and couldn't hear Dodd or Sheill at all. If we were lucky, maybe the dinks wouldn't even know we were here; they'd just pad right on by.

Then Lieutenant Beelzebub came running up, demanding, "What the hell is going on?" in his normal speaking voice, an irritating whine.

The lieutenant's name was Weems, actually. I just call him Beelzebub because he's a fat, sweaty heathen always surrounded by a swarm of gnats. They like the taste of his perspiration.

The dinks froze as suddenly as we had; no longer moving, they vanished into the swirling gray. We had just lost whatever surprise we had, lost our best chance to get out of this encounter without a shot fired... and all because a buffoon who had been a first lieutenant for three years now couldn't figure out it was a Medusa drill!

One of them moved; then another. They moved singly, here and there, and we no longer had a clue where the mass of them was.

Weems began to panic; we'd all seen it before. "Aren't we going to take them out?" he asked Goforth, who was frantically putting his finger to his lips. "Somebody should take them out. "

Goforth put his hand to his ear; he was listening to Arlene's report, trying to stifle the lieutenant with his other hand.

But Weems saw a ghost to his left, a specter to his right. We were surrounded! In Weems's mind—I use the term loosely—they were Indians, we were the 7th Cav, and he was Custer.

"The lieutenant isn't going to stand for this!" snapped the lieutenant. "Goforth, take out those soldiers!"

The gunny broke his own drill. “Sir, we don’t even know who they are... Sanders says they’re wearing robes and hoods—”

“Scythe of Glory!” said Weems, again raising his voice.

“No sir, just robed men—”

“Gunny, I gave you an order... now take down those men!”

Arlene flashed past me again. “What the hell’s going on?” she hissed.

“Weems wants us to take ‘em down. “

“Fly, they’re monks! You gotta stop the crazy son of a bitch!”

I was the second-ranking non-com; Goforth would listen to me, I thought. I hunched over and jogged to the gunnery sergeant. “Gunny, Arlene says they’re monks.”

“Taggart, right?” said Weems, as if bumping into me at an oyster-shucking party.

“Sir, they’re just monks. “

“Do you know that for sure? Does anyone know that for sure?”

“Sanders said—”

“Sanders said! Sanders said! Does Sanders have to deal with Colonel Brinkle every week?”

“Sir,” began the gunny, “I think we should recon the group before we open fire.”

Weems looked him in the face, shaking in fury. “As long as I’m giving the orders here, Marine, you’ll obey them. Now take down those men!”

Monks. Freakin’ monks!

I snapped. Maybe it was the bodies, or the body parts.

The mountain air, thin oxygen. A gutful of Weems, Arlene’s frightened, incredulous stare, the way Goforth’s jaw set and he turned to give the order—a twenty-year man, he wasn’t going to throw it away over a bunch of lousy religious dinks.

But suddenly, it occurred to me that if Weems were lying facedown in the deep muddy, he wouldn’t be giving no orders. Then we could let the damned monks disappear, and

nobody would be the loser.

“Scuse me, sir,” I said, tapping the looie on the shoulder.

He turned, and I Georged him. Full-body swing; came out of Orlando, where I grew up. Picked up speed over Parris Island, hooked in at Kefiristan, and turned off the lights of Mr. Lieutenant Weems in pik Nizganij.

Alas, they only flickered. Power was restored. The dork didn’t have a glass jaw; have to give him that.

Weems sprawled messily in the mud, and a couple of the boys were on me like monkeys on a tree. Weems flopped for a bit like a giant spider, then he found his hands and knees. He glared at me for a moment, an evil smile cracking his face. “Later,” he said. Then he turned back to Goforth. “That don’t mean crap, gunnery sergeant; now take down those men—or are you going to frag me, instead?”

Goforth looked at me, looked at Weems, looked at the ground. Then he clicked his M-92 to rock’n’roll and quietly said, “Fox—take down those men.”

I closed my eyes, listening to powder hiss, bullets crack, the metal clang of receivers slamming back and home. The screams of the dying. The shouts of the victors. I smelled the smoke from the smokeless power, the primer, fresh blood.

I’m in hell, I remember thinking; I’m in hell.

We mopped up the enemy troops in record time.

Strange thing; none of them shot back. Fact, no weapons were found... just fifty-three men ranging from pre-teen to seventy or eighty, wearing brown robes and hoods, shaved heads, a couple carrying prayer sticks.

The boys wouldn’t get off my back. Weems wouldn’t even walk around where I could see him, the murdering bastard, while he formally charged me and I opted for a formal court-martial instead of Captain’s Mast.

Jesus and Mary, somebody should put a bullet in his brain. I could taste the trigger. I didn’t know how I was ever going to be shriven if I couldn’t feel remorse.

-1

I didn’t miss Earth, but I sure as hell hated Mars. Sitting in a dingy mess hall on Phobos, one of the two, tiny Martian moons, seemed like a nice compromise.

Ordinarily, the C.O., Major Boyd, would have handed me over to the jaggies for trial; but the day after Weems gave the fateful order that bought him a mouthful of fist from Yours Truly, the 15th received orders to answer a distress call from Phobos. Fox Company was due to rotate back to the world anyway; Boyd decided to mail us to Mars.

They poured me onto the transport along with the rest of Fox; plenty of time to fry my butt after we figured out what the hell the UAC miners were squawking about this time.

The Corps, the Corps, all glory to the Corps! I don't think you know what the Marine Corps truly means to me. It has a bit to do with my father; no, he was not a Marine, God no. Maybe something to do with growing up in Orlando, Florida, and Los Angeles, seeing first the ersatz "Hollywood Boulevard" of Universal Studios East, then the even phonier real thing out west. Glitter and tinsel. . . but what was real?

Everything in my life rang as hollow as the boulevard until I found my core in the Corps.

Honor wasn't just something you did to credit cards. A lie wasn't called spin control, and spin was something you only put on a cue ball. Yeah, right, you think you know more about it than I? I know it was all BS, even in the Corps. I know the service was riddled up and down with lying sacks of dung, like everything else. "There is no cause so noble it will not attract fuggheads;" one of those sci-fi writers Arlene is always shoving at me, David Niven or something.

But God damn it, at least we say the word honor without laughing. At least we have a code—"I will not lie, cheat, or steal, nor tolerate those among us who do"—even if individuals don't always live up to it. At least it's there to reach for, even if our grasp falls far short. At least decency has a legal definition, right there in the Universal Code of Military Justice! At least respect means more than leaving the other guy's graffiti alone. At least we do more crap by six A.M. than most of you civilians do all day. At least the Corps is the Corps, semper fidelis—damn it, we know who we are and why we are! Do you?

Arlene never saw it the way I did; hell, no one did. I was a majority of one.

But you can't understand me unless you understand this much: there is a place in the world where decent men walk the streets, where water flows uphill, where miracles happen behind enemy lines and without air support, and where a guy (boy or girl) will stand on the wall that divides you people from the barbarians at the gate, take a bullet, and shoot back at the son of a bitch what fired it.

Unless you've been there, you'll never know. I want to take you there.

The long trip to Mars was dull, and the little voice in the back of my head had plenty of time to ask whether I would do anything different if given the chance. I had to honestly answer no.

Funny thing is, I always hoped I'd go to space one day . . . but not like this. My idea was to be on a deep-space exploratory ship, pushing out beyond the bounds of the known solar system. But when I scored only a 60 on the MilSpaceAp test, the chances of me receiving a deep-space assignment ranged somewhere between infinitesimal and "forget it." The big surprise was that one right upper cut to the concrete jaw of Lieutenant Weems opened my pathway to the stars.

Not only would I do it over again, I'd still enjoy it!

I stared at the two men whose job was to guard me, and had a strange feeling of unreality. "Want some coffee?" one of them asked with something that sounded like actual concern. His thin face reminded me of one of the monks.

"Yeah," I said. "Black, if you don't mind." He smiled. We'd run out of cream back in Kefiristan, and when he hopped up to Phobos, the supply situation was no improvement.

The guard's name was Ron. The other guard's name was Ron, too—I called him "Ron Two," but they didn't see the humor in it.

We didn't talk much. It seemed a little insulting only having two Marines protecting such a dangerous type as Yours Truly; but the other men were busy figuring out what had gone wrong on Phobos.

After we up-shipped to Mars Base, we sat for a solid day, trying to find out why the UAC miners on Phobos had sent a distress call—and why they didn't answer now. In the Marines, you spend eternity so bored you'd look forward to your own court-martial as a break in the tedium. Then an unexpected danger with huge, jagged edges comes rolling over all the set routines, a reminder that the universe is a dangerous place.

The last message we received from Phobos was:

"Things coming through the Gate." When something that serious hits the fan, boredom is returned to its proper place as a luxury. The court-martial of a corporal was deemed less important than a potential threat to Mars—and not important at all compared to an immediate threat to the profits of the Union Aerospace Corporation.

With a ringing cry of "sounds like they're smoking something up there," Lieutenant Weems boldly led his men into the transport. At first I thought I'd be left behind on Mars Base; but either Weems thought I might prove useful to have along, or else he just didn't

want a loose end. I volunteered to go along. Sometimes I'm not very bright.

Major Boyd did his best to brief us by video feed, under the obvious handicap of complete ignorance. He made the best of it. We were issued pressure suits, in case we had to leave the immediate vicinity of the Gate. You couldn't stay very long outside the pressure zone, and you'd get mighty cold, mighty fast. But at least the suits gave you a fighting chance to get to a ship or a zone before you were sucking vacuum. I was pleased to be issued a suit; I was less pleased that Weems didn't issue me a weapon.

While I contemplated the lethal uses of common household articles, PFC Ron Two brought the promised cup of coffee. It tasted bad enough to be a strategic weapon of deterrence. The expression on the guard suggested that he might have sampled it before passing it on to me; but maybe he was just plain scared of the situation. I couldn't really blame him.

A word about these Gates on Phobos and Deimos, the two tiny moons of Mars; you've probably heard about the Gates, even though officially it's a secret.

They were here when we first landed on Mars. It was a hell of a shock, discovering that someone or some thing had beaten us by a million years to our own closest neighbor! It was long before I joined up, of course, but I can only imagine the panic at the Pentagon when we found ancient and wholly artificial structures on Phobos, despite the complete lack of any form of life on Mars.

It was pretty clear they'd been placed there by some alien intelligence. But what? All my adult life, I'd heard speculation: all the usual UFO culprits . . . Reticulans, Men-in-Black, ancient Martians—that was the most popular theory, despite not working at all: there was no native life on Mars; but try to tell that to generations raised on Martian Walkabout, Ratgash of Mars, and Mars, Arise!

Me, I figured it was a race of alien anthropologists; they got here, said, "Hmm, not quite ready yet," and left a "helipad" in case they decided to return . . . which they might do tomorrow or a hundred thousand years from now.

Somebody decided to call them "Gates," even though they just sat there doing nothing for as long as we've known about them. But surrounding them was a zone of about half Earth-normal gravitation ... on a moon whose normal gravity is just this side of zero! In addition to the big, inert Gates, there were also small pads scattered here and there that instantly transported a person from point A to point B within the area, evidently without harm . . . teleports, if you will. I had heard about them but never seen one; damned if you'd ever get me into one, either.

When the United Aerospace Corporation bribed enough congressmen for the exclusive contract to mine Phobos and Deimos, they built their facilities around the Gates, taking advantage of the artificial gravity . . . except for those parts of the operation that wanted low gravity, which they built outside the "pressure zones." After the big reorganization, the Corps got the task of guarding the Gates.

Well—it looked as though the big Gates weren't quite so inert as we all thought.

Once we landed on Phobos, the gunny dropped me and my two guards at the abandoned Air Base depot (in the "western" pressure zone—anti-spinwards) and took the rest of Fox Company on to the UAC facilities, Weems in tow, to re-establish contact and "secure the situation." All my friends went with Weems, leaving me with the two Rons for company.

The Phobos facility is built like a gigantic, under-ground cone extending many hundreds of meters into the rock. There are a bunch of levels, I'm not even sure how many. Eight? Nine? The whole thing is built in the center of the solar system's largest strip mine, which would be terrible for the Phobos ecology—except that Phobos doesn't have an ecology, of course; it's an airless moon of ice and rock.

The facility was on the opposite hemisphere from the base. Big deal. . . the entire moon is only about twenty-five kilometers in diameter. You can walk from one pole to the other, except most of it is disturbingly close to zero-g, outside the pressure zones.

We had the radio on in the mess hall and were periodically picking up messages from Weems's Weasels. We'd about given up hope of hearing anything from the UAC guys who used to be on Phobos. As I sipped the scalding wake—up—call, wondering who I could sue if I burned my tongue, I couldn't help but scrutinize the two Rons. Neither gave the impression of being on top of the situation. They kept glancing at the closed cafeteria doors, at the radio, at each other . . . They weren't paying much attention to their prisoner.

They were also having the same conversation every twenty minutes or so. It generally started like this: "What do you think's happening?" one would ask the other.

I was tired of listening to variations on I-don't-know, so I volunteered a theory: "Somehow the Gates turned on, and whoever built them decided the UAC was trespassing. Maybe they were wiped out."

"But who attacked us?" asked Ron One. Funny; I never thought of Union Aerospace as part of "us."

"They said monsters were coming through the Gate," said Ron Two with the same sense

of surprise he'd displayed the other half-dozen times.

"They said 'things,'" I corrected. Neither heard me. Things or monsters, I had faith in Arlene and the rest of the guys.

The guards didn't strike me as being overly interested in the subject of high order physics. They had reached firm conclusions in the realm of the biological sciences, however. They didn't believe in monsters.

The truth is that neither did I.

In one respect I was as bad as the PFCs. There were questions that couldn't be answered yet, but they wouldn't stay out of my mind. Who was the enemy? How had they reached Phobos through the gateways? And most troubling of all, why hadn't Fox found any bodies yet? Major Boyd and even Colonel Brinkle back on Earth would want answers to these questions and a lot more.

Suddenly, the radio sputtered to life, grabbing our attention, an invisible hand reaching out to choke the breath from us. It was PFC Grayson, out front on recon, reporting to Weems, who was elsewhere in the facility. The young Marine had found a corpse. Weems radioed back the obvious instructions.

"ID impossible, sir," reported Grayson, his voice tense. "It's in too many pieces. I can positively say that it was a white male. It looks like—Jesus, sir, it looks like claw marks. And this body's been chewed."

Wild beasts on airless Phobos? Judging by the sickened expressions from Ron and Ron, it was all too evident that neither of these specimens had ever seen combat. I've seen my share . . . and all at once, the idea of living long enough to attend my own court-martial seemed very appealing. Even five years at Leavenworth looked good. The fact that I didn't have a gun crawled around deep inside my gut like a tapeworm. Right then I decided to remedy the situation.

The masticated body parts had been found in the processing plant. We heard Weems over the radio issuing orders to converge on that point when a burst of static interfered with the reception.

When Grayson's voice came in again, it was loud and clear. Up until that moment, the universe still made some kind of sense to me. Of all the military scenarios running through my mind, none prepared me for what happened next: "Jesus Christ! It's not human," shouted Grayson. "Too big . . . shaped all wrong . . . humanoid . . . red eyes ..."

While Grayson was providing this fragmentary report, he punctuated his description

with bursts from his rifle. Before he could become more coherent, we heard an inarticulate roar of animal pain from whatever he was shooting, and then he shouted, “I can’t put it down!” The next scream we heard was fully human.

My whole body went cold. Jesus—Arlene was down there.

Keep cool, keep your head—she’s a Marine, damn it!

One of the Rons looked like he was about to throw up.

“Okay,” I said, “this has gone on long enough. We know we’re in this together. Give me a gun and let’s make some plans.” If Arlene were being shot at, God damn it, I intended to shoot back! The honor of the Corps was at stake, not to mention my best buddy’s life.

The radio was reduced to background noise for the moment as Weems the Weasel tried to control the situation. The nervous looks exchanged between the dynamic duo in the mess hall made me wonder about training that completely destroys initiative. On the brink of death, all the Rons cared about was going by the book—even if that book printed their own obituaries in flaming letters.

One finally generated the initiative to say, “We can’t give you a weapon!”

I tried again. “Staying alive is the objective here. We’ve all got buddies down there. They don’t court-martial the dead! You can’t help anyone or defend anything if you’re dead. Now give me a piece!”

If either of them had shown a glimmer of intelligence or guts, I wouldn’t have taken the next step. But they insisted on being idiots.

Jesus Christ! As the Godfather said, there are men who go through life begging to be killed.

-2

Shut up,” said the first Ron.

“You’re going back to detention,” said the other. This was a truly pathetic spectacle. Suddenly, I had become the threat in their eyes, simply because I was forcing them to face an unpleasant situation head-on.

A number of things happened at once: more screams and gunfire came over the radio, and I thought I heard a woman scream. The nearest Ron unholstered his 10mm pistol and pointed it at me—then the poor jerk gestured the direction he wanted me to walk.

He gestured with the hand holding the pistol. With an invitation like that what could I do?

I caught his arm, moved the gun aside, and rabbit-punched him in the kidneys; the gun slid across the floor. The other Ron was still fumbling with his holster, so I turned and jabbed him in the throat. . . not hard enough to kill, but with enough impact to keep him busy trying to breathe.

Sorry, Rons; Arlene PFC Sanders means more than the both of you rolled together!

I turned back to the first one, who surprised me by regaining his feet and making a grab with his good arm. Too bad for him, he was off balance and fell toward me, providing another irresistible target. I flat-palmed the back of his head, and he was out like a light. The other Ron was still doubled over, trying to breathe as I collected their weapons.

"You guys aren't exactly cut out for Light Drop Infantry," I said in as kindly a voice as I could muster.

Now I had a problem. They weren't bad guys, but I couldn't trust their goodwill not to come after me. Their fear might be enough to keep them out of my hair, but I couldn't count on that, either. Nor did I want to leave them sitting ducks for the hostile forces that were loose in this station. So I helped the one who was still conscious to his feet and waited for his glazed eyes to clear a bit.

"Listen, Ron; we've got a situation here. So far as I can tell, we only have these two sidearms between the three of us. This is not good. The lieutenant should have left us with some weapons, don't you think?" It was a rhetorical question, so I kept on. "I'm leaving one of these guns with you, unloaded." I let him sink back on the floor and slid the ammo clip across the floor. "When you feel well enough to reload, I suggest you barricade the door better than I can lock it from the outside, and wait for orders."

He looked sick as a dog but nodded, and I left him to his own devices. I pocketed the remaining ammo clips. I wanted all the edge a few extra rounds could provide until I could find an armory and lay my hands on some real firepower, if the factory had any.

As I locked the mess hall doors behind me, I heard the radio sending out useless static crackle; no Weems, no Goforth—no Arlene. Well, last I heard, we were all going to have a party, with Grayson's remains as the Guest of Honor. I didn't like that particular train of thought so I derailed it. Time to get serious.

After ten minutes of humping around the compound, I found a landcart—the last one. That was thoughtful of them. Phobos is so small, a diameter of only twenty-two kilometers, that I almost could hoof it to the factory . . . particularly in the ultra-low

gravity. But I might need to evac the survivors; and in any case, speed counts.

Although I'm not claustrophobic, I'd lately had my fill of blank walls. The spaceship was the worst. Traveling through a million miles of nothing in a little cubicle just so you can reach another cubicle at the end is not my idea of the conquest of space.

At least for the one day we spent on Mars, we had a view. The domes were made of super-thick, insulated plastic, but were cleverly designed to give the illusion of being thin as a soap bubble. The only trouble was that the view wasn't very impressive—a blank expanse of empty desert broken by an equally barren, dark purple sky. I was only so thrilled with looking at stars. I liked some-thing bigger up there. Although we could see Phobos from Mars base camp, it was so tiny it almost looked like a bright star trucking across the sky. Not enough moon for a melancholy mood.

But now as I crawled the land-cart out under the black, airless sky of Phobos, I enjoyed my first genuine feeling of freedom since I left Earth. Mars loomed in the sky, three-quarters full, larger than any moon and burning red as all the blood of all the armies ever spilled in uncountable battles across the stupid, drooling face of eternity—the face of a monster.

By contrast, the gray, dull surface of Phobos looked like brittle, laundry soap or dried oatmeal; the only variation was Stickney, the huge crater that covered a quarter of the moon's surface and filled the rest with impact striations.

At that moment I thought that Mars might be the last beautiful sight I would ever experience. Ahead lay nothing good. The thought that I might shortly die didn't bother me nearly so much as the dread of letting down my loved ones . . . again.

There weren't that many back on Earth, but there was one here on Phobos that meant everything to me.

Maybe I did love her; I couldn't say. I mean that literally ... I couldn't say it with her hooked up with Wilhelm Dodd, the dirty bastard. But that didn't mean crap; if Arlene were in trouble, then putting my life on the line was the easiest choice I'd ever made. Doing my duty didn't mean I had a death wish; it meant that I would have to stay alive as long as possible to find her and hump her out. All right, and the rest of Fox, too.

So with Mars looming gigantic and our sun a shrunk-en, distant ball of flame, quickly setting as I crawled toward the factory, I sped through Phobos daylight, across the terminator, and into the black night.

My stomach started roiling the moment I left the zone and entered the correct gravitational field of Phobos—not quite zero-g, but close enough for a queasy stomach. I

had to watch my speed carefully here; I wasn't sure what the escape velocity from Phobos was . . . probably a lot more than a crawling land-cart could make. But I sure as hell didn't want to end up in orbit—the tractor treads didn't work too well out there!

I wished I could drive the land-cart right inside the refinery, but I had to leave it in the garage on the surface. It sure felt good to get back under even the half-normal gravity in the refinery zone. The silent station lurked below the surface, containing what was left of Fox Company.

As I began the long descent, I promised to keep very, very quiet. Early in a career in the Light Drop Infantry, you learn the absolute essential of lying to yourself. Sure enough, there was noise, and I was the source of it. Even in the low-g, my boots squeaked slightly. Each squeak was magnified in my imagination as if giant rodents nibbled at my heels. The rectangle of light beneath me grew in size as there was no turning back.

I thought about using the lift, but there was no telling who I'd find inside. The access-tube ladder looked a safer bet.

A popular feature of these permanent stations is how there's always light and air so long as the small reactor is working. Imagine my disappointment on climbing down the ladder into the hangar when I noticed the first signs that something was seriously wrong: the lights were flickering, and I didn't hear the whine of the air recirculators.

The light was adequate to show empty corridor stretching in front and behind me. This section didn't seem to show any signs of recent conflict. . . and no sooner did a small part of me make the mistake of relaxing than I heard a sharp hissing sound. Before I had time to think, the 10mm was in my hand and I had spun around into a defensive crouch. I'm sure I scared the leaky pipe real bad. At times like this, nothing is more welcome than an anti-climax.

As I examined the damaged pipe, mindful not to be scalded by the escaping steam, I realized that I might have found something interesting after all. The pipe had been dented by a blunt metal object of some kind, and there was a rusty stain on the floor underneath it.

There was really only one direction to go, so I went. That direction would also take me toward the hangar control room, where I could swear I heard low, growling noises. Somehow I didn't feel like reholstering my gun. I didn't like the way my palm was sweating, either.

Taking it nice and easy, I proceeded down the corridor. I had a good, long view ahead of me. No room for surprises. I didn't hear the animalistic noises again, but that didn't

make me feel any better.

Finally, I reached the control room. Right before I pushed the door open I felt a sudden shiver on the back of my neck and spun around, trying to look down both directions at once, like one of those crazy cartoon drawings of a double take. But there was nothing. At least nothing I could see. No casualties yet, thank God.

The control room was empty, but it had a peculiar odor like sour lemons. After months in a barracks, whether in Kefiristan, on Mars, or in space, you get used to the smell of paint and gallons of disinfectant. But this was nothing like that. I didn't like it one bit.

It took only a few minutes to establish that all the equipment was in working order—except for the communications system, which was smashed into non-existence. Then I had a brainstorm. There might be a gun locker here, something left over from when Phobos was an Air Force outpost; something a bit heavier than a 10mm pistol would greatly improve the adjustment to my new environment.

I found the locker and jimmied open the door fairly quietly; but there were no weapons. Bare cupboard. Not even a slingshot. But so it shouldn't be a total waste, there was a nice selection of last year's flak jackets; not combat armor, but better than skin and a pressure suit. One looked like it fit me, so I put it on.

There seemed nothing else to do but resume my journey along the corridor that must ultimately take me into the rest of the station. I was reaching that dangerous psychological state when you feel that you are the only living person in what had been a battlefield situation. Another word for it is carelessness.

Reconnoiter, you bastard! My little voice was telling me to get back with the program. And not a moment too soon. A human figure came striding purposefully in my direction from just around the curve of the corridor.

I almost shot first, and asked questions at some undetermined future date. Reminding myself that Arlene and my buddies were here, as well as UAC civilians, I relaxed the old trigger finger that crucial centimeter. But I kept the gun on the human shape and experienced a sickening moment, not of empathy, but of reluctant understanding of Lieutenant Weems and the monks.

When the fearsnake slithers around inside your gut, it's pretty damned easy to just start squeezing off at anything that moves.

Then I recognized the shape as one Corporal William Gates.

"Bill!" I shouted, relief flooding me at contact with a fellow Light Drop. "What the

hell's going on? Are you all right? Where's Arlene—the rest of Fox?"

At no moment was there any doubt that this person approaching was the corporal with whom I'd played poker, drank, and told nasty jokes. We'd been through enough together that I didn't even mind that he was one of the monkeys who jumped on my back when I popped Weems. Bill had a very distinctive face with eyes spaced wide apart and a scar that ran from his prominent chin into his lower lip.

He was walking in an erratic manner; fatigue, I assumed. Men in combat situations can get very weird, and I'd seen plenty worse than this.

Battle fatigue might even have explained the strange words coming out of his mouth, stuff that sounded like an old horror movie. Bill was staring straight ahead; but he didn't seem to recognize me as he chanted, "The Gate—the Gate is the key—the key is the Gate." I didn't like the spittle on his chin, either.

As much as I wanted to run over to him, I held back. There was something really wrong here, nothing I could put my finger on yet, but it was like that smell in the control room —little hints that something was FUBARed on Phobos.

"Bill," I tried again. "Bill, it's your cuz, Fly."

This time he noticed me. I could tell because he grinned the most evil grin I've ever seen in my life.

Then he raised his rifle and opened fire!

Even then, I didn't want to believe what was happening. Fortunately, my bodily reflexes were more realistic. Diving behind a pillar, I was already preparing to return fire.

I had to try one more time. "Stop firing, Bill! It's Fly, goddamn it. Stop shooting!"

-3

Bill didn't stop; he came closer. Desperate, feeling like Cain, I returned fire. Given the half-dead condition Bill was in, killing him all the way should have been easy. The first bullet took him in the throat, above his kevlar armor. That should have done the job, but he kept on coming. I pumped more rounds at Bill, and finally one connected with his head. That dropped him.

But even as brains and blood oozed onto the corridor floor, his body continued to flop around the way a chicken does when its head has been removed. Humans don't do that . . . and they don't have a sour-lemon smell either, which was suddenly so

overpowering that I could barely breathe.

I stared, shaking like a California earthquake.

I was looking—at—a zombie.

That was all that kept racing through my head, screaming the word over and over again between my ears . . . zombie, zombie, zombie! What utter shit. Maybe Arlene could believe in all that crap and bullroar; she watched those damned, damned horror movies all the—I wasn't never going to watch anything like ... a freakin' zombie? I was crazy, buggin', freaked like some hippie punk snot flying on belladonna.

There are no goddamned zombies! This is the real world, this is—"

Gates flopped some more, then stiffened up so quick, it was like he'd been dead for hours. Scared, but drawn toward him like iron filings to a magnet, I crept forward and touched his corpse.

Billy Boy was ice-cold. This meat was decidedly not fresh.

I gagged, then turned aside and vomited. He was blue.

His skin was tough, like leather.

Private Gates was a freaking zombie. Walking dead. They'd killed him, then sucked the life out of his body, so that in just half an hour, he was many days dead.

Arlene . . . !

I knew what I had to do next. I was crying while I did it. I hoped I'd find some magazines to go with my new acquisition, a 10mm, M-211 Semiautomatic Gas-Operated Infantry Combat Weapon (Sig-Cow, we called it). Bitch of a way to get one.

Gates only had a single spare mag, and the one in the rifle was dead. Still shaking, I reloaded the rifle, dropping rounds left and right, and crept on, wondering who would come running at the sound of me murdering my dead chum.

Leaving Gates's body, I started walking fast, then a little faster. Suddenly I was running . . . not in fear, but sick rage. The little voice in my head that usually keeps me on track was screaming about discipline and strategy and keeping my cool. The voice wanted me to make a nice, practical analysis of the evidence.

I had every intention of listening to reason, but my feet and brain stem had other ideas.

They were running from the face of a man who used to be a human being; running toward the bastards who reworked him.

I've always had good survival instincts. They'd never abandoned me before, not even in the worst firefights in a career that had seen its fair share of combat. But here and now, in a dull, gray cavern under the craggy surface of Phobos, my body was betraying me. If I could just stop seeing the slack jaw, the dead eyes, I could get control again. But the face wouldn't go away; even the character-istic twitch of the right eye that used to annoy me when Gates was alive unnerved the hell out of me now. I couldn't stand to be winked at by a zombie.

Yeah. Zombie. Putting the word to it helped. At least I was running a little slower and started paying attention to my surroundings. I saw the walls of the corridor instead of a phantom mask of death; and I heard the loud echoing of my footsteps, my labored breathing . . . and the shuffling noises of other feet.

Four of them were waiting for me around the bend—four zombies. They stared at me with dead, dry eyes . . . and one of the zombies was a woman.

I didn't know her; UAC worker. Thank God it wasn't Arlene. I didn't even want to think about Arlene with gray flesh and a sour-lemon smell, sneering and pumping bullets at me without any recognition.

I felt a rage I'd never felt before; my blood was on fire and my skin couldn't contain the boiling, liquid anger. I shook from hate so deep that military training could never reach it.

I didn't want to shoot these travesties of human life. I wanted to rip them apart with my bare hands! They shuffled toward me, fumbling their weapons and pump-ing shots like their rifles would never run dry. What did I do? I staggered directly toward them, raising my own M-211 and taking one of the walking dead in its shoulder ... a useless shot.

It was the girl that broke the spell. Some little piece of who she once was must have been left in her brain, a faint echo or resonance of human thought. She didn't charge blindly like the other three; she turned and fell behind cover to plink at me.

My higher brain functions kicked in. I shook my head, then strafed while sidestepping to a pillar; once behind cover, I aimed a shot into Zombie One's head. It roared, then danced like a headless chicken and collapsed. I got the message: only head shots got me any points. Just like in the movies.

The citrus stench almost overwhelmed me. I snuck a quick glance at the zombie I'd just smoked . . . some-thing squirmed inside its brain. Swallowing nausea, I took a bead on

Zombie Two.

The zombie-girl chittered, and the other two headed jerkily toward the console behind which she crouched. I caught Zombie Two before it made it halfway; but the other one took a position behind cover, and both it and Zombie Girl returned fire.

A standoff. I was trapped behind the pillar, two zombies behind an instrument console marked UAC and covered with sticky-pad notes, the three of us separated by no more than twenty meters. Swiveling my head, I stared wildly around, trying to spot something useful.

Five minutes deep into the Phobos facility, and I was pinned down inside a mortuary in hell. A dozen bodies sprawled on the floor from the open control room in which I stood all the way to a curve in the corridor beyond which I could see no farther. Recognizing a few of them didn't do my stomach any good. The others were probably UAC workers.

I thought I'd seen war in Kefiristan.

The undead and I played a game of tag around the pillar; I popped out to fire off a shot, and they sprayed my position a moment after I abandoned it.

There wasn't much time to appreciate the fine details; the third time I popped around for a shot, I slipped on fresh blood. Even as a kid, I was good at turning mishaps into advantages; special training merely augmented my natural instinct for survival.

I hit the floor on my knees, then dropped to my belly to aim a shot while braced against the floor. The third male zombie rose to fire down on me, and I caught it in the throat, knocking it backward; before it could reacquire its target, Yours Truly, my next shot took Zombie Three in the right eye.

The female wasn't wearing a uniform or armor; I realized she must have once been a UAC worker, not a soldier . . . which might account for her bad aim. She fired off a couple of rounds that missed by a wide margin.

I can fight this war forever, I thought, rage starting to creep back. Then it struck me: I could fight this war forever, at least until I was finally blown away, and never even come close to figuring out what had happened here at Phobos Base.

I had to take one of bastards "alive," if that was the right word.

The plan flickered through my head between one shot and the next; and now that I finally had a plan, I was Light Drop Infantry again!

Quickly, before she could adjust and acquire me, I bolted around the pillar, head-faked to the left, then cut right and hopped over the console. Zombie Girl swiveled the wrong direction, and before she could turn back, I swung the butt of my Sig-Cow into her temple.

She dropped like bricks on Jupiter. The rifle sailed from her hands across the floor. I slung my own M-211 across my back, flipped her over and shoved my pistol in her mouth.

"What the hell's going on?" I demanded.

"Mmph hmmpb rmmph," she said. I pulled the gun

out of her mouth, but she kept talking as if she had not even noticed it. "—is the key. Gate is the key. Key is the gate. Coming. Kill you all."

Zombie Girl's eyes shifted left and right; she was preternaturally strong . . . but not as strong as big Fly Taggart. My hand drooped as I stared at her, and she snapped at it like a rabid dog, trying to bite me.

Abruptly, I realized why the zombies' eyes were so dry and their vision so bad: they never blinked.

I pushed the pistol against her forehead. "If there's any piece alive inside of you, you know what this thing will do to your shriveled, little brains. What the hell is coming through the gate?"

"Great. Ones. Gate ones." She focused her eyes on me, seeming to see me for the first time. She didn't answer, but for a moment her face was filled with such torment that I could no longer stand the interrogation.

I cocked the hammer; her eyes rolled up, looking over my head. "You want this?" I asked.

Zombie Girl closed her eyes. It was the only kind of prayer left to her by the reworking that made her what she was.

I closed my own eyes when I squeezed the trigger. The gunshot snapped me awake again; I jumped up, slid the Sig-Cow into ready position, and backed away from the undead dead.

What the hell was going on? I started to think I had an answer . . . part of an answer.

“Who built the Gates?” The question endlessly on everyone’s lips might be about to be answered. Maybe. But were the “Great Ones” coming through the Gates the ones who had built them? Or had the builders already been overrun by some even more powerful, horrific critter, who was now joyfully following Gate after Gate, finding and overpowering all the colonies of the builders’ “empire”?

Neither thought was pleasant: humans were either trespassers who were about to be run off the property or dessert after a main course of Gate builders.

I got the shakes, real bad. I backed into a dark corner, M-211 pointed toward the corridor, the unknown, the way I hadn’t been yet. I had not seen a particular body I’d half dreaded, half hoped to find. Christ. Arlene was still Somewhere Out There, one way or the other.

I prayed she was lying dead on the deck, not stumbling toward me with dry, unblinking eyes and a sour-lemon smell.

I might soon be the only living human on Phobos, I realized. I had little faith in the guards I’d left back in the mess hall. First contact with zombies, and they’d role over and, to coin a phrase, play dead. I could imagine a rotting corpse that used to be Lieutenant Weems telling them to get with the zombie program; the Rons would salute and “Yes sir!” themselves straight to hell.

The old survival mechanism was definitely starting to kick in for Yours Truly. I’d never been completely comfortable as a team player. I could see myself doing the job of zombie exterminator until I was the only biped left standing on Phobos. These living dead characters weren’t very good soldiers. Yeah, I could dust them all. Except for one little detail.

I couldn’t bear coming up against what used to be Arlene Sanders. No, that wasn’t very appealing at all. It’s not like she was my girl; she had her Dodd, and it seemed to satisfy her. Dodd and I didn’t really like each other, but we tolerated for Arlene’s sake.

Not love, I swear. It’s just that Arlene lived in the same world I did, and I mean a lot more than just wearing the same uniform. She wasn’t like any other girl I’d been ... I mean, any other girl I’d known.

Arlene remembered being awakened by a D.I. heaving a trash can down the hall, same as me. She remembered the jarhead getting all over her; “on your face, down-up-down-up-down-up—you keep pumpin’ ‘em out until I get tired!” She knew about reveille at 0500, PT (Physical Training), or a dainty, eight-mile run at 0505.

Arlene knew the smell of disinfectant. She knew all about scraping two years of

accumulated crud off a wall with a chisel so the next guy could slap on a quarter-inch-thick splash of anti-corrosion paint.

She'd spent just as many months as I wrestling a goddamned floor buffer up and down a corridor, while already dog-sacked from hours of PT, obstacle course, combat training, small-arms, endless, mindless instruction on how to break down and reassemble a Sig-Cow while blindfolded, and lectures on the exotic venereal diseases of Kefiristan, Mars, Phobos Base, and Ohio .. . hours that always seemed to add up to twenty-six or twenty-eight per day.

Arlene figured out a lot about me in record time. She was bright, and just as committed to a military career as any other man in the outfit. She'd become my best buddy in the platoon.

As I sat there, wiping blood and crud from my face in the eye of an impossible hurricane, it helped to think about Arlene. Recalling her features drove the monsters from my mind. I played a little game with myself, not letting the horror rise up and engulf the picture I was drawing.

I don't think I've ever seen a better-looking woman than Arlene, objectively considered. She wasn't drop-dead gorgeous in the conventional sense. To use an older phrase from a braver age, she was "right handsome." Five-ten and compactly built, she worked out more than anyone else in the platoon. She had beautiful, well-cut muscles.

(Once, when for a few days she thought she might be "with child"—not mine—Gates had said, "She's such a man, I bet she got herself pregnant." He didn't say it loudly.)

I liked how she looked at everyone through slitted eyes, giving her a hooded serpent look. She was not to be trifled with, as one skank found out when he thought it was funny to sneak up behind her and pull down her pants.

The rest of us were certainly interested in seeing all we could of her well-shaped posterior; but we weren't idiots. Without turning around, she backhanded him perfectly and broke his nose. At the time all I could think of was how much I enjoyed seeing her move. We're talking ballet here.

Of course, there was a lot more to Arlene; she had a brain. Those are in short supply in the service, even in Light Drop, and I hated to see one go to waste. I took her to Corps music concerts, and she dragged me to old sci-fi movies. We got drunk together sometimes. We played poker, too; but my only chance against her was when I was stone-cold sober.

One night we got so drunk that we fumbled our way into a kiss. It just didn't feel right.

We were buddies, not lovers.

Arlene and I reached an unspoken agreement where we didn't talk about that night. As if to prove what a pal she could be, she started setting me up with dates. She had girlfriends who were always first-rate in one way or another, and they liked to oblige her by hanging with her pal. I didn't kick. I just didn't seem able to return a commensurate favor.

Arlene told me once how she wanted to save up some money and go to college someday. I didn't hold that against her. I wished the best for her.

The best. That thought shot down my reverie in flames. What could the best be for her now, in this place? Death, I guessed; anything would be better than gray flesh, dry, unblinking eyes, and jerking limbs. "No," I heard myself talking to no one, "she'd never allow herself to be turned into one of those."

But what if this reworking took place after death?

Swallowing hard, I stood up and decided to get back to business. I needed ammo; a wild shot had destroyed the magazine and receiver of one of the Sig-Cows; the only thing a zombie could use it for now would be as a war club, so I left it on the floor. Nobody had a select fire weapon, which was too bad; I sure missed the luxury of launching three or four rounds at a time toward a zombie head . . . much better chance of a bull's-eye. On the other hand, if they had had one of the two select-fire M-220 Dogchoppers that a squad carried, I might not be alive to pick through the weaponry.

I shoved some magazines into my ammo pockets and loaded up both weapons. No sense carrying another Sig-Cow. I really wanted to get my hands on the riot gun that Dardier usually carried, though—except it would probably mean ripping it out of her twitching fingers after blowing a hole in her pretty, blond head.

I followed the trail of corpses another two bends of the corridor, taking as much ammo as I could carry without rattling like a medieval knight. We were all supposed to carry head-talks, so we could communicate ... but I didn't find any, which was pretty suspicious. No ELFs or MilDataBuses, either: nothing whatsoever that might be used to communicate what the hell was going on.

And I always made time to check the faces. So long as one, particular face wasn't there ... I knew I could stand it.

I almost felt relief when I ran into two more zombies. Now that I knew what to do, it was just some sickening sort of exercise. I only "killed" one of them; the other, I just popped its rifle, then shot out its knees and hips; I wanted it alive, maybe to answer some questions before I smashed in the curling mouth with the yellow teeth.

I didn't recognize this one; it was a former UAC worker, used to be a man. It didn't have even as much mind left as had Zombie Girl; but this time, I let it babble for some time:

"Big, coming through, big, Gate is the key, killing, killing, all the killing, coming through, coming to kill you all, the Gate is the key, the key, hell and damns is the key, coming through the Gate . . .

"Phobos! Fear, fear, fear, fear, fear!

"Coming to Phobos, coming from Phobos, crossing

the Styx, pickup Styx, Styx is the key."

I waited until it started repeating itself; after a moment, a chill crept down my neck: the thing was repeating itself exactly, like a tape loop. Suddenly more scared than I had been in hours, I put it out of its misery (and mine).

I backed up into a dark alcove, praying nobody had a light-amp glasses or an infrared sensor. I needed to think this through.

A single strip of hellishly bright luminescence flickered off and on high in the center of the ceiling; a bare sun bulb was all that was left of the lighting system. The strobe effect made shadows look like monsters, creeping toward me. But I didn't smell any rotten citrus, and heard none of the characteristic zombie gibbering.... just a strange clicking sound ahead, like a dolphin with laryngitis. I figured I was safe for the moment.

Phobos was pretty obvious; they were here, at Phobos Base. They came to Phobos . . . but what did the thing mean saying they were coming from Phobos?

I started feeling nauseated. My skin began to creep up and down my bones . . . If the zombie didn't distinguish between yesterday, today, and tomorrow, then maybe it was telling me that Phobos was not the final target of the invasion; they were going to cross the River Styx, the river of the dead in Greek mythology.

And what was on the other side? Well, hell, I supposed. Hades. But wait—if you were starting from hell, then "crossing the Styx" took you to ...

I swallowed the nausea back down. Sweat dripped down my forehead, stinging my eyes.

The target was Earth. Terra mostly firma. Home sweet hovel.

I accepted the fact that I was a dead man. After four years of Catholic school, run by Father Bartolomeo, Society of Jesus, I had always thought I was pretty much "prayed out." Certainly, even after four years in the Corps, the last three in Light Drop Infantry, I hadn't had a word to say to the Big Guy, if He were even listening.

But now, for the first time, after a cumulative seven-teen weeks of actual combat intercut into four years of military life, I finally understood that stupid line about there being "no atheists in foxholes." I didn't use the words that the Jesuits taught me, but I know who I was talking to, begging for the guts and skill not to hose up.

"Suicide mission" was a weak term for what I was doing. I'm as afraid to die as the next jarhead; but goddamn it, I didn't want to be damned as a walking dead!

I told the Big Guy what I'd done wrong in the last, ah, seven years and promised him a lifetime of penance if He'd just forgive me and send me into battle shriven. It was a hollow offer, I knew; that "lifetime" was probably measured in hours. Thank God it's the thought that counts.

Taking a breath, I swung my rifle around, finger outside the trigger guard, and stepped out of the alcove. I continued around a corner toward the clicking noise.

Suddenly I saw what looked like a working radio! Hurrying over—too quickly for caution's sake—I saw that only the front part of the mechanism remained. The back was ripped out in a way that showed clear sabotage. Up to that moment, it had seemed possible that the radios were destroyed accidentally, casualties of battle; but this was clear evidence of at least human-level tactics, far beyond what I'd imagine the zombies could do.

There was somebody else wandering around here. If I hunted long enough, I figured I'd find it... if it or they didn't find me first.

Turning a corner in the corridor, I saw more evidence of some kind of strategy: on the wall, a map to the installation had been burned beyond recognition, while the space around it was only slightly singed. Whoever that other something or somebody was, it knew that more of us would be coming after it; it didn't want us to be able to find our way.

Ahead was a hatchway, the door open. The light directly over it was broken; but a steady, green glow emanated from beyond the narrow opening; the glow did not come from any electrical source I could think of. Even as I moved toward the entrance, I knew I wanted to be anywhere else but here. A new odor assailed me, far worse than the sour

lemons. This was the loving, sweet aroma of something that should have been buried, or better yet, flushed. It literally burned my nostrils.

I fumbled for the mask that accompanied the combat armor. Jesus, I thought, what I wouldn't give for a working environment suit! My hands shook as pulled it over my mouth and nose, wondering what horrible, toxic fumes I was breathing.

The surge of air from the suit augmented the bad air; but it did little good. The molecules of the toxin were evidently smaller than oxygen molecules and didn't react to any of the filters; I could still smell them right through the mask.

Every warning klaxon in my body was screaming; my skin tingled, and the proverbial hair on the back of my proverbial neck jumped up and did some PT. I took a few tentative steps farther in, then I came up short; I'd found the light source.

Pools of thick, green liquid bubbled on both sides of me. The stuff was luminescent, probably radioactive. It looked like boiling lava on Saint Patrick's day. I wasn't going to stop and run any experiments; but I had no doubt the gunk would eat right through my combat suit, given enough time. The prudent decision was to stay as far away from the green slime as humanly possible.

No sooner had this thought crossed my mind than a ton of bricks slammed into me from the right, knocking the 10mm pistol out of my holster and into the green toxin. Something had decided to run the experiment after all.

The 10mm made a hissing sound as it disappeared from view. I didn't care. I had problems of my own.

Flipping over, I struggled to get to my feet and bring my big Sig-Cow into play, if I could figure out what the hell hit me. The impact had blurred my vision. I stood up, dizzy, shaking my head. The figure that had hit me so hard stood just out of sight, in the shadows. I assumed it was another zombie, but a stronger one than I had encountered before.

Then it cut loose with a hiss, and more of that clicking sound I had been hearing. Well, one little mystery solved.

The strength in this—zombie?—inspired greater caution. I rolled my M-211 around and skated to the side, waiting for the creature to come to me. He did.

As the large body moved into sight, I saw brown, leathery skin, rough like alligator hide, with ivory-white horns sticking out from chest, arms, and legs. The head was inhumanly huge, with maddened slits of red for eyes. It was a monster!

It was a demon.

-5-

My first reaction was to laugh. This was a childhood nightmare, a bogeyman. The part of me that had worked so hard to grow up just couldn't believe in something that looked like this.

Only trouble was, the damned thing didn't appreciate its own absurdity. It took a few steps toward me where the light was better. Movement made the figure less ridiculous. Shadows played across its rough hide, and I saw that the wrinkled flesh under the eyes were wet. I hated to admit that it really was flesh. The eyes flickered with an angry red light. The worst features were the lips curling back to reveal ugly, yellow canines. This was no Halloween mask with a rigid grimace. Inhuman as this monster was, I couldn't confuse it with an animal.

Just an alien bastard, I told myself over and over; I was a lot more comfortable with the idea of an alien, even an alien soldier—a cosmic-grunt. Not a ... a demon.

The extraterrestrial stopped advancing. It turned its head at an angle no human could copy, but kept its eyes fixed on me. Mexican standoff.

Despite it having attacked me first, I couldn't shake the thought that it was my responsibility to try to make contact. No communication seemed possible with the hollow shells who used to be my buddies or UAC workers; the most I could drag out of them was simple parroting of what they had heard, before or after death.

But this one was different . . . this one was—how could I fire up a conversation with an alien "demon" whose interest in humans seemed purely nutritional?

"Who are you?" I asked. I figured it wouldn't know English, but might at least guess from the tone what I had asked. But it threw me a curve by smiling wide and silently mouthing the same question, Who are you, seeming to mock me.

I tried again: "Human being," I said, tapping my armored chest. "Understand? Do you talk?"

Nothing. Nada. I took a calculated risk: I wasn't about to put down my weapon; but I slowly extended one hand, palm forward, in what I hoped was a universal symbol of nonaggression.

There was a response but I didn't quite know what to make of it. The grotesque humanoid slowly lifted its right hand up to its shoulder and stroked the white protrusion of bone, allowing its thumb to linger on the sharp point. The sight was very strange and it did not suggest peaceful intentions. Definitely a Mexican stand-off.

I suddenly got nervous about leaving my hand exposed. The sharp teeth suggested a healthy appetite. I became acutely aware of my environment. The bubbling, green sludge behind me burbled louder, and for the first time, I thought I heard the monster breathing.

The breathing stopped.

Pure instinct took over. Soldiers sometimes take a sharp breath just before attacking . . . some hold their breath as the floodgates open, releasing enough adrenaline to turn coward into hero.

The monster attacked so quickly I couldn't have gotten a shot off even if my Sig-Cow hadn't jammed.

Whatever the thing was, it was not stupid. It charged me, clawing for ray throat with one set of nails while the other hand fended off my bayonet.

That was the only good news; if it was afraid of my blade, then surely the alien would bleed if I stuck it.

If...

I stopped pushing and suddenly pulled with the monster, instead of against it. I fell backward, and four hundred pounds of leathery skin and iron muscle dropped on top of me—and right onto my bayonet. With an inhuman scream that nearly ruptured my eardrums, the demon died, convulsing a few last times before instantly stiffening into what felt like a stone statue.

I was mighty damned glad to learn that demons did bleed, at least on Phobos. I was relieved for some reason that the blood was red.

I was less pleased to feel the stone weight of the monster crushing me into the floor. Jesus and Mary, did I wish I could turn off the Phobos gravity generator, just for a moment!

Years spent in Catholic school came back to me; I remembered an old penguin, Sister Beatrice, who was obsessed with the biblical injunction to avoid unclean things. Unclean things!

My stomach heaved; shaking the body off me with more strength than I'd ever experienced before, I almost vomited on the very spot where blood pulsed out of the alien's belly wound.

Jumping too quickly to my feet, I slipped in the slick, red goo—right next to one of the bubbling pits of green sludge. Heat poured from the boiling, green liquid waste. I didn't want that stuff any closer to my face than it was already; I had a feeling the luminescence was not harm-less phosphorous, and this didn't seem the time to run any tests.

I took a moment to catch my breath. It had been difficult enough to accept the fact of people—buddies!—turned into zombies; but this thing at my feet meant anything could happen next. I didn't want to let my imagination run wild. Reality was bad enough at the moment.

Not since childhood had I really felt a desire to pray. The first monsters of my life had been stern nuns refusing to answer the questions of an inquisitive mind. But now I felt a need for God, if only to have a power big enough to swear an oath on.

"I'll stop you," I promised, "whatever you are, however many you are." It helped to say the words out loud, even if one of the bastards heard me. Hell, they could hear my footsteps, anyway. "If there is a God, please let me live just long enough to stop these monsters from dropping ship to Earth!"

The small voice of reason was growing smaller all the time; scientific knowledge! Physical law! Like the song says, biggest lie you ever saw.

Survival came first; killing lots of monsters. Learning something useful about the enemy was just fine, so long as it came third. And there was the problem of how I would communicate any useful discovery; and to whom.

Ahead were the remains of yet another smashed radio. A human hand still touched the controls. The hand was not attached to an arm. The best explanation was that the body probably lay dissolving at the bottom of the pool of green slime.

Making my way out of this section seemed the most important move for all three goals, if only to get away from the hot, green liquid. The monster had thrown me off. I couldn't help imagining the creature from the black lagoon, or green lagoon, waiting at the bottom of every toxic pool.

If I could meet one two-legged nightmare, I could meet more. And I don't just mean more like the ones I'd already fought; there could be worse things, anything! What were the laws for monsters? Thoughts of horrors crawling around on the bottom of radioactive

sludge pools gave way to even more unlikely scenarios. How about creatures that could exist outside the domes, in airless space? And if they didn't need to breathe, maybe those aliens didn't bleed, either.

I made myself stop. If I kept this up, I wouldn't need to be picked off by the enemy; I'd be saving them the trouble.

I heaved a sigh of relief to leave the toxic-spill room, clearing the jammed brass from my Sig-Cow receiver; it made little difference—I only had two or three rounds left and nowhere to stock up.

As if being rewarded for a bad attitude, there was another collection of inanimate dead just through the doorway, awaiting inspection. For the first time since this nightmare began I actually felt relief at the sight of human corpses. At least they were human. Not zombies, not monsters. If I'd been more careful—or paying more attention to my imagination—it might have occurred to me that one of the zombies could be pretending to be a corpse. But somewhere in the back of my brain I had already figured out that the zombies were no-brainers. They weren't about to pull tricks.

There was something very reassuring about thinking about things that weren't possible (or at least not very probable). Sure beat the hell out of imagining super-monsters that could do anything! As I surveyed the dead men, the damaged weapons, the lack of ammo, and for dessert, a smashed radio, I finally understood what must have been going through the minds of these soldiers as their lives were ripped out of them.

I understood why they hadn't done the intelligent thing and withdrawn, regrouped, reported: they'd been so overcome with revulsion, just like Yours Truly, that they'd simply charged into the mob (of zombies? monsters?) in a berserker fury, killing anything that got in the way. They stopped thinking and started reacting instead —and were cut down, one by one.

A heavy rumble from behind grabbed my attention. Setting a new record for spinning around, I realized I had to go back into the blasted toxic-spill room to check this out.

So I did.

The latest surprise: when I killed the monster, it evidently fell across a lift lever I hadn't noticed. I arrived at this conclusion because of the large, metal platform which finished lowering itself right in front of my nose. Beyond the lift was a brand new corridor I hadn't seen before.

To enter or not to enter? That was as good a question as any I'd had all day. Staying behind meant facing inconceivable danger and unimaginable odds. Whereas going

forward meant facing unimaginable danger and inconceivable odds. Or something.

The corridor ahead had two appealing features: there were no slime pits and the light was brighter. The latter decided me. There had to have been some good reason to make the choice I made.

I backed up and took a flying leap; fear lent my feet wings . . . but not jet engines, unfortunately. I landed short and teetered on the edge of the biggest pool of green crud in creation. I windmilled my arms ... if I hadn't stepped back, I would have fallen back.

For a second all my foot felt was icy, icy cold, as if I'd stepped into liquid nitrogen. Then the pain struck. I tried to yank my foot free, but my muscles wouldn't respond!

My leg was on fire from toe to thigh. I lurched forward, falling on my face; my foot was free of the toxin, but I shouted through clenched teeth.

Fighting a suicidal impulse to grab my still-wet foot, I wrapped my arms around my gut instead. If a zombie or monster demon had stumbled across me then, it could have snuffed me with my blessing. It was minutes before the throbbing pain in my leg subsided. I scraped my foot against the floor, rubbing off as much of the toxin as I could; but my leg swelled tight and angry red inside my ruined boot.

But at least, thank God, the pool was behind me.

The new corridor seemed antiseptic and clean after what I'd just stepped in. If there were unpleasant odors, they didn't penetrate my visor.

I followed the corridor until I came to a room on the right. Something made me hesitate about going in. It wasn't a sense of danger or anything like that. Maybe it was because the door was closed. Mostly they'd been open. I don't normally credit sixth sense stuff or mysticism; but I've learned in combat that you ignore your instincts at your peril. There are human "predator senses" that normal, civilized life pretty much breeds out of us.

I had my weapon at the ready even though two shots from now the Sig-Cow would be nothing but a fancy spear.

Kicking the door was easy; looking into the room was hard. There was one lone body on the floor, female, her back to me.

-6

For a cold-gut second, I thought she might be Arlene. The impression lasted only a few

seconds; then I saw it was Tij "Dude" Dardier. We'd fought together pretty closely in Kefiristan, and you get so you recognize a buddy from behind, especially females in a crack fighting unit.

Her face was unmarked, still cute, still a little girl with red hair who had a big surprise for any man who thought she was easy pickings. I wondered if a monster or zombie had gotten her. The ugly wound was in her stomach.

There was something funny about her posture; she lay as if she had a secret.

I stared for a moment, coaxing her dead body to talk to me Then I figured it out: Dudette was lying on top of something, shielding it from dry zombie eyes.

I touched her gently, then gingerly slipped over her corpse. Dude Dardier was lying on top of the pump-action riot gun I'd been wishing for earlier—her death-day present for Yours Truly.

I felt like a ghoul, but feelings were a luxury. With a shotgun in my arsenal, my survival rating took a big leap up the charts.

I checked the bore and found no obstructions. There were plenty of shells in the bandoleer around her body. I thanked Dudette for being a Marine to the end . . . semper fi, Mac.

Back in the corridor, I found remains of a map on the wall. The Bad Guys evidently followed a plan, proven by destroyed radio gear and vandalized wall maps. But this time there was just enough left of the map to figure out the basic direction toward the lift, which I prayed was still working. Being properly armed did wonders for my psychology; I decided maybe I would do well to generate a tactical plan.

There is no north or south on Phobos, but I oriented myself along the facility's major axis. Getting to the nuclear plant was the next logical move; it had the largest concentration of equipment. . . and perhaps even an untrained engineer like me could jerry-rig some gear into a working radio.

I found the lift without further molestation; naturally, it was broken, shot to hell—the hydraulics leaked away from numerous gunshot holes. But the manual escape hatch still worked. Placing myself back into a narrow, confined space was about as appealing as it sounded, and my damned imagination started bugging me again at precisely the moment duty called. My imagination was not very patriotic; it needed six weeks of boot camp.

There was a dim light in the shaft, very, very dim. Every square foot of the base was supposed to be constantly lit, bright as day, except for the barracks. Someone in charge

must have been mugged by a flash-light when he was a kid and wanted nothing more to do with them. Maybe I shouldn't have complained; light was light.

As I climbed down the long shaft, it occurred to me to think about something cheerful, a silver lining that must exist somewhere in these storm clouds. There had to be something.

And there was. I hadn't found Arlene's body yet ... and so long as I didn't know what had happened to her, there was hope.

I figured the nuclear plant must be at least six stories down. Just keep climbing, that was all I could do. Climb. Hope. Watch out for demons. Real simple. I preferred thinking about Arlene.

I remembered the day she showed up from Parris Island and joined the real Corps, the fighting Corps. I looked up from monkeying with the sticky belt-advance on a .60 caliber auto-stabilized, and I saw a brutal babe in cammies, spats, webbing, and sporting a newly shaved high-and-tight. Catching her eye told me all I had to know. She knew what she was doing, all right. The Corps is protective of its haircut, flat on the top and shaved on the sides. We're talking a sign of distinction, a challenge thrown at every other service. God help the Navy, Army, or Space Force puke who shows up on one of our bases in a high-and-tight! What happens afterward is why God made Captain's Mast.

But Arlene was no innocent. She wore her cut high and proud, and wore a single, red, private's stripe.

Lieutenant Weems (pre-punch) took one look at Arlene Sanders, a long, hard look, and curled his lip.

He watched her hand her packet to PFC Dodd, who stared at her like she had two heads. So far as I know, that was the first time they ever met, they who were destined for ... well, not love, exactly; extreme lustlike. (After about a year of ignoring him with all her might, then another six months of despising him, she shamefacedly confessed to me that she'd spent the night in his fiat.)

All in all, not the best-foot-forward on this first day for the first woman in Fox Company.

Of course, the opinion of Lieutenant Weems was already a debased currency by this time. But the opinion of the other men mattered. And no one could express that company opinion with more eloquence than Gunnery Sergeant Goforth, the company's "grand old man." Hell, he was in his late thirties, an eighteen-year Marine, the last ten in Light Drop.

Goforth looked like Aldo Ray in those old John Wayne movies. He was heavyset, muscular but not fat; he shaved his head but would probably be bald anyway. Goforth was a Franks tank with legs, a few freckles mixed in along with the Rolled Homogenous Armor.

The gunny made a big deal of sauntering over to Arlene and let loose with his thick, Georgian drawl:

“Hooo-eeee! Where’ud the lay-dee get thuh purty “do?”

She looked him in the eye. That was all. Not a bad answer, really, but I thought that under the circum-stances a few words of reason might be in order.

I volunteered myself for the task. Partly because I liked a woman with guts; partly because I respected the men in the Corps-and felt their position could be expressed in a more thoughtful manner than Gunny Goforth was likely to manage. But mainly I spoke up because at some deep level I hate all rules, symbols, rituals, fighting words, gang colors, routines, decorations, medals, trophies, badges . . . and anything else that suggests one human being is to be taken more seriously than another in a given situation simply on the basis of plumage. Besides, I was making no headway with the damned .60 cal.

I was sitting on the mess hall table and felt very much above it all as I said, “Private, a high-and-tight is not a fashion statement. You gotta earn it.”

That seemed a nice ice breaker. She must have agreed because she spoke to me, not Goforth. “I’m as much a Marine as the next man,” she said, glancing at me before returning her steady attention back to the gunny.

The first retort that crossed my mind was to take a big bite of the red apple that happened to be in my hand. The longer it took to chew and swallow the piece of apple, the more profound would be my clever rejoinder, it seemed to me.

So I did. And Goforth took a step closer to Arlene, deliberately breaking her space. Arlene stood her ground, not budging an inch.

In between bites of the apple, I thought I would essay another arbitration. “You know,” I essayed, “a high-and-tight is not mil-spec for ladies.”

“It’s not regulation for men, either,” she shot back. There was no arguing with that, but there was plenty of apple left to crunch.

Gunny Goforth didn’t have an apple. “Any Muh-reen who wears thet ‘do,” he said, “sure

as hell is gonna earn it, missy." I thought the "missy" was a bit much.

Arlene Sanders leaned forward into his space, close enough to either kiss him or bite off his round knob of a nose. Instead, she said two words: "You're on."

Goforth was just as stubborn. He was native to Georgia but might as well have been from Missouri when it came to matters of proof. "Every Muh-reen is a rifleman fust," he said. "If'n you want to spoht thet thang, missy, then you had best pick up yer cute lil' buns and follow me tuh the rifle range."

She gave him a curt nod. Challenge accepted. They started to leave, then Goforth noticed my juicy, red apple, which had tasted much better than the discussion, far as I was concerned.

"Hey, Fly," he said, "howzabout grabbin' thet sack o' apples?"

As I hoisted the apples and made tracks, I could honestly say that I didn't have a clue what old Goforth was up to.

The range was a short walk. Every man who had been present for the exchange of words followed along. No one wanted to miss entertainment of this high a caliber, no pun intended.

Goforth walked on over to Arlene and said, "Private, you need a whole helpin' o' guts to wear thet 'do. Takes more'n jes' a steady rifle hand, thet it do!" At least he didn't call her "missy" this time.

Holding up his hand, palm toward me, he shouted, "Fly, toss me one of those apples. Ya'll watch a history lesson." Now that I finally had the idea, I was none too happy, but Arlene just smiled—a little, thin smile. I think she guessed what the gun' was scheming.

I slapped the apple into the gunnery sergeant's paw. He casually tossed and caught it a few times, then asked Arlene: "Yuh lak historee, lil' lady?" He was laying the accent on so thick I could barely understand him.

"Let me guess," she said with a thick grin. "You like William Tell."

Goforth looked crestfallen that she had outguessed him, stealing some wind from his sails. But if verbal teasing wouldn't do the job, he was more than ready to push this thing on to the real thing. I could see it in his face; there was no humor left.

When I had first joined Fox Company, Goforth went out of his way to make me feel welcome. About the worst he did was to tag me with the nickname Fly. He didn't bag on

me the way he was doing to Arlene, He gestured to Dodd to bring over the artillery, and Dodd brought a .30-99 bolt-action sniper rifle, top of the line. Goforth flashed Arlene a big, soapy grin; but she held her ground.

Made me wonder, not just about the gun', but the other guys, who leered and chuckled unpleasantly. Plenty of men are solid guys, decent fathers and husbands, but revert to Wolfman when confronted by physical prowess in a woman.

As Goforth lived up to his name and went forward with the William Tell bit, I was getting panicky ... but I kept it to myself. She was going to play this one out to the bitter end. I figured that from the way she planted her feet, put her arms behind her and said, "Go for it!"

Abruptly, everybody stopped laughing. Gunny Goforth noticed but wasn't about to back down with eight, I'm sure it was, eight guys watching. With an almost delicate concern, he carefully placed the apple on her head. Then he took the .30-99 and slowly backed away from her. He aimed just as carefully and said, in a voice that had lost all the sarcasm, "Last chance, honey." I thought "honey" sounded better than "missy."

Arlene didn't move, but I could see that she was trembling ever so slightly beneath her bravado. I sure as hell didn't blame her. Goforth took a deep breath and said, "All right, darlin'... I suggest in the strongest terms thet you don't flinch none."

I was the one who jumped when he squeezed off a shot—and damned if the apple didn't split perfectly down the middle, each half falling on either side of her head! Everybody let out his breath, and a ragged cheer erupted.

"Way to go, Gunny!" said one man.

"Fox Company ichiban!" said another.

We'd forgotten one item. We'd forgotten that Arlene had put her skull on the line. The drama wasn't over until she said it was.

As Goforth basked in his moment of glory, the boys all praising him, Arlene walked toward him. Her hands were behind her back and she was smiling sweetly.

I saw what she was carrying before the gun' did. She held an apple up until he saw it; then she tossed it to him.

Silence again; nobody moved. Then just as smoothly as you please, Arlene Sanders picked up the .30-99 from the table, staring expectantly at Goforth and cocking one of her eyebrows.

I never doubted what Goforth would do. His basic sense of fair play could be counted on; and he had guts. He wasn't about to lose his men's respect. Not Goforth! So, in the words of the old-time baseball player, it was deja vu all over again.

He put the apple on his head, his icy eyes boring into Arlene's. She watched him just as intently; no lovers were ever more focused on one another.

She cocked and raised the rifle, which wasn't even fitted with a scope, just iron sights. A few of the men backed farther away from the cone of fire surrounding the gunnery sergeant. That pissed me off, so I deliberately took a few steps closer to the duel. Something about this girl inspired confidence that she was no more likely to blow away a spectator than the gunnery sergeant.

Goforth had his own concerns: "If you have to miss," he said so softly that it didn't even sound like him, "please tuh make it high?" He smiled with an effort. The request seemed reasonable enough.

Arlene said nothing. She lifted the rifle nice and slow. She didn't make us wait; she pounded out a shot, and the apple was blown off Goforth's head. Corporal Stout ran over and picked it up. It was still mostly in one piece, but there was a gratifying furrow a little high off the center.

After a long moment, during which no one said a word, Goforth walked up to Arlene Sanders. Putting hands on his hips, he made a big show of inspecting her high-and-tight, while we all held our breath.

Goforth bent down, examined her right side, left side, back, front, then looked her evenly in the eye, winked and nodded. "It's you, Private," he said. And I was pretty damned sure he wouldn't be calling her "missy" again. She didn't miss, you see.

Some of the boys took to calling her Will, though.

-7

The odds against Arlene's survival in this hellish maelstrom were astronomical; but then, so they were against mine. Hope that she might have made it kept me going; fury at the thought of her death spurred me to action. Maybe just when I was running out of steam, the need for revenge would inspire Yours Truly.

As if to test my newfound resolve, Phobos threw some more at me. Glancing down, I saw that the access shaft did not descend the full six stories required to reach the nuclear plant. The ladder ended in a few ragged shreds of metal; an explosion had cut off the rest of that route.

Of course, I could always get to the nuclear plant level really fast, so long as I didn't mind the sudden stop at the end.

"Damn, I knew this was too good to be true," I said out loud. Just before running out of ladder, I saw a thick, metal hatchway leading to the next level down.

It looked solid, heavy; a pressure lock held it shut; I would have to spin the wheel to open the door, a happy trick when the ladder ended a couple of rungs above the hatch.

For a moment I was stymied. I could just barely reach the wheel by hanging one-handed from the last rung; but I had no leverage ... I couldn't turn it to save my life. I took a deep breath, closed my eyes, and thought for several seconds.

Jesus—what am I, stupid all of a sudden? I rotated around the ladder, lowered myself until my lower legs poked through the last hole, then slowly let my body down until I dangled upside down from my knees. Now I had the leverage; all it took was muscle.

I cranked the wheel clockwise, loosening it until it spun freely. I wrestled open the door —and now for the hard part.

Holding tight to the wheel of the now-open door, I straightened my legs, dropping heavily as the wheel spun. I clung to it grimly, swinging back and forth until I finally stopped swinging.

I edged around the door, caught the corresponding wheel on the inside and swung myself up and into the shaft. I lost nothing but any desire I might have had to take my name to heart and become a Human Fly as a career path.

The access shaft led me into a tunnel where the light was crappy again, flickering on and off like some sicko nightclub. It was tall enough to stand, and I did.

After five meters I decided this was the weirdest stretch of architecture yet. The light was lousy, but it was good enough to make out the walls—plain and gray with an oddly rough-hewn surface, as if hacked out of the rock with a magic ax.

Large, rectangular designs everywhere gave the feeling of a colossal cemetery. More than anything else, the strong impression of something truly ancient and evil permeated the narrow corridor. Alien, and yet familiar somehow. It was as if I'd been cast inside the oldest labyrinth in the universe and would spend the rest of my life trying to find my way through the maze.

Damn imagination acting up again .. memory was better; at least it gave me something to hold on to. A link to the past, a better past.

Then I saw old Gunnery Sergeant Goforth, walking down the corridor in my direction. The failing light made it difficult to make out skin tones; but the smooth, purposeful way he walked made me think he couldn't be a zombie.

It was Gunny Goforth—and he was alive!

"Gunny!" I shouted, ecstatic to have finally found another live one in this nightmare.

He didn't answer; my God, that should have told me something.

He raised his old .30-99 and aimed it right at my chest. I threw myself to the floor just as the bullet seared over my head.

"Damn you to hell!" I shouted, outraged that the universe had decided to foist a new, improved zombie on me. Too late; I'm sure he already was—and me with him.

This new horror seemed even more unfair than that crazy brown monster with the spikes. I'd settled into a nice, predictable pattern about what to do with zombies. No fair changing the rules now!

Hey, Gunny, you're still a pal.

He marched straight for me, no deviations, no ducking, no turning sideways to make a more difficult target. An obliging guy in his way. Of course, he was working the bolt on his sniper rifle, trying to blow my head from Phobos back to Earth.

I didn't just lie on the floor, waiting for that unacceptable outcome. I had plans of my own.

In life, Gunny Goforth could shoot—hell, could shoot the apple off a young Marine's head. In death, he shot better than all the other zombies. And he blinked.

I rolled back and forth, waiting until he was ten meters away; then I shouldered the riot gun and squeezed.

It was the biggest mess I'd made on this godforsaken rock of a moon so far. The splatter was sort of an artistic statement. But I must have gotten something in my eye. I kept blinking, but it wouldn't go away.

Somebody was laughing, sort of a crazy, whacked-out cackle. "Shut up!" I screamed at the jokester, wiping my cheeks. The laughter stopped, and only then did I realize the mirth was courtesy of a poor jarhead named Fly.

This was no good. I had to get a handle on the situation. Running multiplication tables in my head helped me chill while I scavenged Goforth's pack for ammo. My breathing slowed to something sane, and my heartbeat took a licking but kept on ticking.

In fact, I was so calm I barely blinked when a whirring, metallic skull sailed past my head.

This time I was sure my imagination was off on a wild toot. I'd never done hallucinogens as a kid, and it just wasn't fair for my imagination to suggest a giant, white skull had gone flying past (on its way to the demonic head shop, no doubt). So I made a deal with my imagination: if it didn't throw any more Halloween balloons at me, I'd give it a break when it wanted to go traipsing down memory lane. I can be fair.

I ran like a madman up the corridor, jogging a couple of times. Whatever it was, I'd lost it for now.

Emerging into a big open room made me feel more claustrophobic. That might sound fairly nutty but you'd have to see this place for yourself. I wasn't bothered by the incredibly high, arched ceiling, supported by grotesque pillars that would be more at home in some ancient palace in India. No, what bothered me was that this huge room was full of barrels of that noxious, green liquid I thought I'd left behind—and good riddance.

The empty, cavernous room was a perfect place for a congregation of Halloween goblins and all species of zombie, fast and slow, dull and the cognitive elite.

No sooner had this unpleasant thought crossed my cranium than the floodgates opened and they started pouring into the room from all directions.

I shrank back into the shadows, trying to look dead and mindless; it worked for a few moments .. . none of the zombies seemed to notice me.

There really wasn't time for a sanity check, but I ran a quick one anyway. I'd read about a mental condition or a philosophy (I forget which) called solipsism: you think of something, and it happens. The ultimate case is when you think you're all that exists, and the whole universe is your dream. Man, I was ready to buy into that, if only I could dream away these monsters as quickly as I seemed to be filling up this room with them!

Well. . . what can I lose? I closed my eyes and concentrated real hard, wishing away the bogeymen.

While I was thus occupied, I was blown off my feet by an explosion and searing heat right over my head. Opening my eyes to excruciating pain, I discovered I wasn't alone

on the floor: whatever had blown me down got the nearest few zombies as well.

I decided that solipsism was a load of crap.

And when I looked up, my old friend was back, the crusty, brown monster with ivory-white spikes . . . and he'd brought his buddies. They watched me stagger to my feet, and they laughed.

Then one of them wound up and threw something, some sort of mucus ball that burst into blood-red flames as it left the creature's hand. I dived across a burned zombie, and the flaming phlegm spun me buttocks over boots.

I looked for a weapon, a glint of metal, a tube, something! But no, these demons were actually producing the fire with their bare hands . . . and their aim was deadly.

The monsters hissed, pointing directly at Yours Truly; then the zombies noticed me for the first time and began shooting. They weren't too particular about innocent zombies getting in the way, either—and whenever one zombie would shoot another, or a demon would pelt a bunch with a flaming mucus ball, the monster victims would turn on their monster allies, completely forgetting about me. While I ran screaming from one side of the room to the other, I filed that little datum somewhere in the back of my brain for future use.

Now the room was really filling up with at least a dozen zombies and three leathery demons . . . and again I dived to the side as a whirring, screaming hunk of steel buzzed my helmet. This time there was no mistake: it was a goddamned flying skull with flaming rocket exhaust spewing out the back. It turned and banked, trying to mow me down and chew me up with razor-sharp, steel teeth, like one of those wind-up "chattering skulls" gone mad.

But the fireballs were the main problem; the brown demons were a lot tougher than the zombies. Suddenly, I was grateful for the pillars; they provided cover, at least. Making a mad dash for the nearest, I fired off the shotgun at the remaining zombies.

Catching my breath, I risked running to the next pillar. This time a fireball almost fried me. There was just no way I could get to the demons from here without being toasted . . . and the shotgun range was too short to pop them where I crouched.

While I dithered, I heard a whirring behind me, then a harsh, iron screech. Sure enough, the flying skull had sailed around the pillars and spotted me again.

I can take care of you at least, you F/X reject! I whipped the riot gun around and fired from the hip, not even taking time to aim.

It was the best mistake of my life.

The little bugger skittered out of the way; I tried to track as I fired, and I popped one of the toxic barrels instead.

It exploded with a terrific concussion, kicking me in the body armor like a mule and tearing off a chuck of my kevlar vest. The skull vanished in a spray of metal gears and exploding JP-5.

Almost immediately, my bruised eardrums were assaulted by another explosion, then another and a fourth. Five or six more barrels touched off in rapid succession. All I could think was thank God I was on the other side of the pillar.

An acrid cloud of blue smoke swirled around the walls and floor . . . residue from the explosive oxidation of the toxic goo. Gasping, I peeked around the pillar at a scene of astonishing carnage.

Zombies and demons alike had been torn to shreds and strips of gray flesh, their parts mingling in a hellish mulligatawny. The stench of a thousand sour lemons permeated the room, even driving out the horrible, burning smell of the toxic fumes. Jesus, I thought, I hope the cameras got the shot.

I climbed shakily to my feet and padded toward the door, chastened by the awesome destructive power in those forty-gallon drums. At the edge of the room I found the only other survivor.

The demon crawled along the ground with its hands, one leg blown entirely off and the other twisted into a crazy angle. It leaked yellow pus, globules that burst into flame as soon as they dripped off the monster's body.

I leveled my shotgun at its head. "Die, you dumb animal," I said with a smile.

"Aaanimaaal," repeated the demon, "not. . ."

I paused, startled. I didn't know they could talk.

"You're right," I prodded, "at least animals kill you clean or leave you alone."

It twisted its head all the way around to stare up at me while lying belly down on the floor. My stomach turned at the sight. "You—are aanimaals when we fix planet."

I curled my lip, but my heart leaped. Which planet was that? Mars? Or did the aliens' plan include Earth? "We'll mow you down as fast as you bubble up out of the sewers,

you piece of filth."

The alien monster laughed, opening its mouth wide enough to swallow a man's head. "Weee throw rocks . . . big rocks."

The image was ludicrous; but I got a premonitory shudder. Somehow, I guessed the emphasis was on the word "big."

-8

Despite my better judgment, I was too intrigued for the moment by the sound of pure evil pleading its case. "Why haven't the others spoken to me? Can you all talk?"

It opened its mouth wide, exposing gums full of squirming cilia and teeth that rolled and shifted position. "Not... all ssssame, like you-mans not sssame."

The alien crawled on a bit farther. I don't think it was trying to escape; it knew that was impossible. I began to worry that it was leading me toward something. Ahead of me was a greenish stone wall carved in bas relief with a hideous, demonic face. Somehow, I doubted that was an original furnishing in the Phobos base of the Union Aerospace Corporation.

"How aren't we the same?" I prodded. I felt in my gut that I was on the verge of something important.

"Ssssome . . . fear," it gasped. Its face showed no sign of distress, but I knew from the shudder that wracked its body that it was very near death. "Othersss sssstrong . . . you ssstrong."

Good Lord—was this alien thing admitting a grudging respect for Fly Taggart?

"Few ssstrong, like you ssstrong . . . mosst good for ssslavesss. You-man ssslavesss."

A thought buried deep behind my ears thrust itself forward. I wasn't too fatigued to pick up that slip of the tongue; even a tongue as thick and brutish as this one. Few strong—others strong . . . there must be other humans who were still themselves and still breathing!

When hell came to Phobos, I had to keep hope locked up in a small space without a zip code.

I kept a poker face; the monster might be smart enough to spot my eagerness at the possibility that one of the living might be Arlene.

Any human survivor would change the Phobos situation dramatically: food and water were minor problems, but I could only operate so long without sleep. With no one to stand guard, giving in to exhaustion was suicide. But I couldn't keep going forever; and if I couldn't rest, all the ammo in the solar system would not save me.

"I'm touched by your concern for my survival," I said.

"Deal," he unexpectedly offered, ignoring the sarcasm.

"You . . . live; you work; you help."

All I had to do was work with the alien invaders and help them conquer the human race, and they might graciously allow me to live as a slave. Jesus, how tempting, I thought.

I decided that I liked the ones who grunt better. What did these creeps want from me? "I've got a great idea. Why don't you tell me what the hell you're after?"

The thing laughed. The sound grated on my nerves like a ripped bagpipe. "Hell... we after," it declared. "Ssssurrender . . . help; you live, you-man."

"As a zombie?"

"You live, not deadwalk; you sssee othersss."

"What others? Who else survived? Did a girl survive?"

Great, Fly; nice and subtle. Does it even know what a girl is? Does it care?

"You help . . . you sssee othersss."

I stared down at the loathsome thing. I knew I had gotten all the intel from it that I could. "Let me answer," I said at last, "louder than mere words can do. Tell me if this is tough enough."

Without another thought, I pointed the shotgun at the monster's upper chest and pumped a round at point-blank range. The alien jerked—then amazingly, stared up at me, still alive by a thread.

The alien grimaced, facial muscles finally growing rigid. Then for a moment it relaxed. "We could eat anybody onccce," it declared. Then it stopped moving; even the cilia in its mouth stood up straight and froze. The demon was dead.

After catching my breath, I started getting angry. It was one thing to fight a human

enemy, but battling malignant demons? Every time I killed one of these humanoid things, I felt like doing a hundred more. That might be the only good to come of this latest encounter. Give no quarter and kill, kill, kill. Kind of reassuring to learn that all that Marine training hadn't been a waste of time.

Of course, the rational portion of my brain still made plans. I wanted to climb down and out of this hangar and reach my next objective, the nuclear plant. The plant was the most dangerous item to fall into enemy hands. Better it should fall into my hands.

Making one last circuit of the zombie bodies, I scavenged for blessed ammunition. I'd have killed for a decent backpack; come to think of it, that's probably how I would have to get one. I was running out of pockets for the ammo.

So, how to get out of the hangar? My playmates found their way in; all I had to do was reverse the process. First thing was to hug the wall and make a nice, slow circuit of the big, ugly room.

The damned monsters bothered me a lot less than the architecture changing on me. I'd never been in Phobos Base before, but I'd talked to guys down on Mars who knew these installations; there was no way this place hadn't undergone a change as bug-nut crazy as the demonic characters themselves.

And what made that more upsetting than the monsters was the idea that the floor you walked on, the wall you brushed against, the damn place could turn on you and become something else. Like a cartoon world that suddenly turns everything into rubber . . . except you.

If this kept up, Yours Truly was going to place his imagination on short rations.

I leaned against the wall, and suddenly it was like those old Abbott and Costello movies back Earthside: the wall had a hidden door. I even tripped going through the blasted thing. In my mind a laugh track played and played and played.

I fell into a new corridor, which I followed to a rising wall at the south end of the hall. There was another of those crazy platforms near at hand. Instinct told me to give it a wide berth, and who am I to argue with my most cherished faculty? When I reached the wall, I found another switch, which I flipped.

The wall shooooshed up, revealing a down staircase; it was an encouraging sign—the nuke plant was down another level or two, I vaguely remembered. Cautiously, I started down the stairs, grateful for steady light. My reward was the biggest slime pool yet, waiting at the bottom. If only I'd remembered to bring swimming trunks, I could have gone in for a dip. Best toxic sludge in the whole solar system right here—come one,

come all.

Skirting the pool, pressed against the wall, I finally ran out of hangar. Along the narrow corridor past the toxin, I found the shredded body of another one of those brown-leather, spiky demons. If it were a talker, someone had already silenced it forever with seven or eight rounds from a Sig-Cow. Score another for the Corps.

The bug lay against a sliding door that belonged on a dumbwaiter. I yanked it open, happy to take out my frustrations on something that didn't shoot, claw, or flame me back.

Sure enough, it was a lift, barely big enough for a big guy to squeeze into. I spotted a funny mark on the wall, as if someone had started to draw a map using a bright, red paint stick—we use them to blaze trails in forests or urban environments. Whoever it was had been interrupted in mid-map. I studied it for a bit, then shrugged; whatever he was trying to tell me got lost in the translation.

I scrunched inside the tiny lift, wondering which of the two buttons would take me down to the plant. Staring at the labels, I decided to push the one marked "Nuclear Plant." And they say you don't get an education in the service!

With a jerk, the tiny lift sank, swerving and rattling all the way, as much as screaming out, here I come! to the whole world. Well, to the whole Phobos pressure zone, I guess.

I didn't have to guess whether this important part of the base had fallen into enemy hands. The minute I stepped off the platform, I was in the soup up to my neck. This particular recipe called for more zombies than I thought could be crammed into such a small space. Come to think of it, the space wasn't all that small. I guess when it's wall-to-wall corpse-sickles, it's easy to lose track of the finer points of design.

For the first time in my life I felt what it was like to be claustrophobic from being surrounded by walls of hu-man flesh—well, formerly human flesh. I couldn't understand why I wasn't dead meat.

Two things worked in my favor: first, so many zombies were sardine-canned in the room, they could hardly move, and most of them didn't even know I was there. Second, it had become clear to me by now that the only use for brains in a zombie was for gray and white color contrast when you blasted their heads like rotten fruit. Even Gunny Used-to-Be-Goforth had been operating on motor reflexes, and he was the most dangerous one yet.

There was plenty of time to think about such things because there was really nowhere for me to go, and I was waiting for one of them to notice me. Then one of those

wonderful moments of dumb luck added the final spice to the soup. Another contingent of zombies trooped into storage, and one of the shambling creeps elbowed aside another, simply trying to find somewhere to stand. In the tiny, new space created, I noticed an undamaged map on the wall!

By this time, I'd arrived at the conclusion that zombies were not responsible for the destroyed radio equipment, the vandalized maps, the deliberately wasted weapons. The advantage of attending my first zombie convention was that there apparently wasn't room for the demon monsters to get in here and do their damage; the space was being used for zombie storage.

Trying to look dead on my feet—not difficult—I shambled a few meters to where I could get a better view of the map—it was a full schematic of the entire station seen from the side. Unfortunately, it didn't include overhead views for each level; but at least I could see how far down the station went. My God, it even had a You Are Here arrow!

I was indeed at the nuclear plant level; above me was the hangar, while still below were the Toxin Refinery—didn't that sound appetizing—Command & Control, the labs, Central Processing, and MIS. Jesus . . . only six more levels to clear; I was afraid it would be thirty!

Funny how what I was seeing triggered memories of malls and shoppers. Best not to dwell on that. . .

Somewhere in the back of my head a shrill voice screamed for me to get the hell out of that room. I figured this situation was too lucky to last.

Without false modesty, I can say I was proven a prophet. In that sea of pale, dead faces, two dry as dust eyes came to rest on Yours Truly. Hoping the unfocused eyes would continue their survey of the room, I didn't move a muscle . . . which was normally what the zombies did when they had no orders and had not spotted a human: they stood and did nothing.

Except, that is, for the one who wouldn't stop staring at me. I wasn't about to make the first move. I'd been through a lot lately but I could still count.

It seemed like this could go on forever; but then, out of nowhere, a zombie-child separated itself from the rest of the throng and stumbled toward me.

Jesus! For a second I didn't recognize that she was as dead as the rest. Seeing plenty of zombies recruited from soldiers made it easy to forget the UAC civilians that had been on this base. But somehow I'd never dreamed there would be children here.

The kid headed straight for me, mouth opening and closing but no sounds coming out. Then those soft, wet, cold hands were rubbing on my arm . . . and I couldn't stifle my reflexes. I put my arm around her to comfort her.

All hell broke loose.

Staring-boy opened his mouth, too; but instead of

words, he belched an inarticulate roar. But he was so hemmed in by his fellows, he couldn't raise the pistol in his right hand. Impatient guy that I am, I acted: I tilted up my shotgun and squeezed the trigger.

A dead-center blast helped a lot. I pumped the slide, then pounded home another shot to clear a path.

Then I was running as fast and hard as I could to the left. In close quarters like this there was no opportunity to use the rifle. My best bet was to find elbow room where I could at least make a stand but that wouldn't put me in a cul-de-sac. The sounds pounding in my ears told me that they were following me, but I wasn't about to turn around and take a head count.

I ducked into an open doorway, then turned like Custer at bay. Three of the creatures shambled past, not even noticing me—the fourth was not so obligingly stupid. It pushed through the doorway, and I raised the shotgun.

Just before I turned that face into an explosion of red, something about it reminded me of my grandfather. I wish that hadn't happened. I was doing all right until then.

The trouble was that every time I made careful calculations about what I could do in terms of stamina, willpower, and even strategy, the old emotions got completely away from me. I'd thought I was a better Marine than this. Then again, they'd never trained us for a non-stop horror show.

I needed a break. I needed to lie down for five minutes because my lower back was killing me and there was a muscle spasm in my right shoulder blade. A nice cold drink of water would have gone a long way toward cooling the fire in my brain. But seeing old Granddad's face on the umpteenth zombie was the latest straw breaking the latest camel's back.

I couldn't shoot. I just couldn't! I grabbed it by its coveralls and shoved it backward with superhuman, adrenaline strength.

It bowled over some of its buddies; then one in the back rank raised a lever-action rifle

and tried to blow my fool head off.

I slapped the deck face first, and the bullet scorched the air, blowing apart one of the zombies that had missed the turnoff a few seconds back, splattering the other two with what passes for zombie brains.

The creatures went mad. That shot must have kicked their IFF off-line, because they opened up on their zombie brethren, who cheerfully returned fire. In seconds, every zombie was shooting wildly at anything that moved!

I stayed very, very still, frozen on the ground, trying as hard as I could to look like a "dead" zombie.

-9

When the ammo finally ran dry, the jerking bodies above me started tearing each other limb from limb, as if auditioning for modern ballet. I seized the opportunity to roll out from under the forest of legs; the rifle was strapped to my back, but in the chaos of the moment, I left the shotgun behind.

I ran, and this time I wasn't followed. After thirty heart-pounding seconds, I was alone with me, myself, and I. And somewhere along the route, I had stooped and grabbed a pack, one of Fox Company's—but I had no memory of having done so!

I was utterly lost. I silently cursed at being reduced to the Sig-Cow and wandered more or less aimlessly . . . terrified of shadows, where half an hour ago I stalked with confidence. With just a pistol and a semi-auto rifle, I avoided confrontation wherever I could.

With no map, I wasn't sure what part of the plant I had reached; then I pushed through another of those trick doors—I would have missed it had I not been sliding along the walls like a mouse—and found the computer room. The lights were blinking on and off, just what I needed for a headache after everything else. When the light was on, it had a sickly blue-green color that didn't do my empty stomach any good.

So far as I could tell, I was alone here, at least in this section. I wasn't happy about the way the corridor went up a little ways and disappeared around a bend. I decided then and there if I ever try to be an architect, all my buildings would borrow from my old high school gymnasium—a big, empty space where you can't possible hide anything. May not be much in the way of privacy, but there are advantages all right.

Placing my back firmly against a wall, I took inventory of the contents of my new pack. First thing that jumped out at me was ammo for the missing shotgun. I was going to

have to replace that as soon as possible. Dude Dardier would have wanted it that way. I had some 10mm rounds for the Sig-Cow that also fit the pistol, a bit of water or other liquid, chewing gum . . . and a small, little metal object that appeared to be a shiny flashlight battery. I had no idea what the last was; the UAC logo was printed on the side, not the globe and eagle of the Corps emblem.

First order of business was checking the liquid. I was worried it might be vodka or gin or rubbing alcohol or something other than what I wanted it most to be. But at long last I was in for a bit of good luck: it was water. While I took a first grateful sip, repressing the desire to finish it off with one gulp, I picked up the batterylike object with my other hand. Then I realized what it was. I'd heard about, but never seen, a rocket this small.

Correction: I had seen one in a UAC weapons demo video when they were trying to sell it to the Pentagon. (We didn't buy it—I wish we had!) Yeah, these were special little babies, all right. But no one from Fox Company had been carrying any rocket launchers. This kind of ordnance was for desert fighting. Where had this rocket come from?

I laughed out loud. Not smart in this situation, but it was becoming a bad habit. If evil demons could be lurking anywhere, and the walls and floors were metamorphosing into Halloween decorations, why couldn't there be a state-of-the-art tac rocket in a forgotten backpack? Maybe I'd find a tomahawk next.

At least I'd stopped laughing. The rational part of my brain was trying to figure out where I might find a rocket launcher. Made sense. I was trying real hard to listen to the little voice that made sense. Only trouble was that a much louder voice was roaring from somewhere lower in the brain. It wanted me to find the rocket launcher, too, but for a less defensible reason.

I guess I'd been more upset by the roomful of zombies than I'd realized—or maybe I'd been this freaked-out all along, and was only now realizing it. My God, did I really want to find that missing launcher just so I could eat a rocket?

Suicide isn't in my nature. I'm an extrovert type, more likely to frag someone, say a certain butthead lieutenant, than snuff Yours Truly. That's sort of a job requirement for the Marines. The battlefield doesn't cure depression.

But the tac-sit here on Phobos was a lot worse than a battlefield. Having to go through the same crap over and over is just part of life. I know guys who have been married.

But what had happened on Phobos was so far beyond normal repetition that it turned me totally cold and numb. If I could just find one living person! That thing had said . . . had implied that someone still lived. Jesus, if there's such a thing as the soul, then mine had

been beaten black and blue.

Maybe I wasn't being completely honest with myself. I could have killed myself with the rifle. There are other ways, too, God bless our training. Waiting for the launcher could have been just a good excuse for postponing the inevitable. Maybe. Or maybe if I found the launcher, I really would put the tube in my mouth and, as they say, "fire and forget."

Fortunately, I never had to make that decision. I found something else instead.

I stood in a long, steel corridor that curved off to the right; the only light came from a bluish, fluorescent tube that curved along the left wall and a sporadic white overhead spot. I crept as near as possible to one of those white-light areas . . . somehow I felt better surrounded by more natural colors, even though it made me more of a target.

Then I glanced to my left and saw it.

I didn't trust my eyes at first. They hadn't been doing much to encourage trust lately. But if what I was seeing was real, then I wouldn't be fooling around with any more self-destructive fantasies.

Directly in front of my nose, scrawled with the same red paint stick that had started drawing a map in the dumbwaiter, were two capital letters: A.S. An arrow was drawn by the same dye marker, pointing to the right at a downward angle.

I stared at the mark, memory working furiously. Two years back I had gone to see the old James Mason movie, Journey to the Center of the Earth. I didn't know who Jules Verne was—but Arlene had insisted. She loved sci-fi of any type.

We made a big event out of it. We had just come off a three-month stint in Peru, torching coca-leaf fields so they'd never be processed into cocaine, and we were ready for an old-movie orgy. We didn't usually eat junk, but for this special occasion, we gorged on the unhealthiest popcorn we could buy, even including black market liquid grease-butter. I can honestly say that I have never enjoyed a trip to the movies so much.

In the movie, Arne Saknussem, world's greatest adventurer, was the first to explore the secrets of Earth's inner world; he leaves his initials marked in candle soot at different levels, so anyone coming afterward can follow his route. The arrows point out the path he took when the caverns branched off.

I stared at the mark. A.S.—Arne Saknussen; A.S.. . .

Arlene Sanders.

My gut dropped to my boots. Arlene! Arlene was alive? It had to be ... what other explanation was there? She was alive . . . and she was doing just what I was doing: going deeper into the station, hoping to find a radio or another living human, or maybe her old pal, Fly. She was drilling deeper into this hell, hoping to find a way out!

There was no doubt in my mind: A.S. meant my bud was still alive ... or at least, she'd been alive up to that point, alive and still herself. She must have survived the firefight that killed her platoon.

All thoughts of self-destruction were wiped away in an instant. I felt supercharged. For the first time since stepping foot on this damned space rock, I was happy! I moved forward, military discipline reasserting itself, putting some breaks on the warrior who would still be needed for the killing time.

Following the arrow led directly to an exit to a patio. I took it. As always when entering a new locale, I braced for a potential zombie attack or another encounter with the monsters. But now I had a new objective: to find Arlene—and for that, I had to find a new shotgun. Neither waited for me on the patio; something brand new was there instead.

This one took the cake, and it was nobody's birthday. Picture a perfectly round sphere floating in the air. No strings attached here. A blue sphere, as pure a blue as a perfect spring day back home, with one extra touch: there was a face on this ball. I didn't have very long to appreciate how butt-ugly the mug was because no sooner had I registered all this in the brain department than the sphere rushed me and smashed into my head before I could even twitch, bursting all over Yours Truly.

I figured I'd had it. For a moment I couldn't breathe with that weird glop all over me, running down the length of my body, reaching the floor so I could conveniently take a header, which I did. My first thought was poison! I could still breathe, though, once my mouth and nose cleared.

With the first swallow, I felt something cold and invigorating rush through my body. Taking a deep breath, the air seemed cleaner and tasted better.

Suddenly, I felt great. If this turned out to be a strange symptom of the alien poison, I could recommend it. Special Endorsements available from Flynn Taggart's coffin . . . reasonable rates. Sitting up, I expected an attack of dizziness; but it never came. The liquid had mostly evaporated by now or maybe absorbed into my body.

With another deep breath—which felt better than ever—I stood up. I hadn't been poisoned—just the opposite, in fact. This crazy floating sphere had been good for me! It

was perfectly reasonable to assume that any weird creature coming through one of the Gates would be bad, and worse, deadly to all things human. Discovering that lovely A.S. had been the most pleasant surprise of the day (yeah, I know day and night are pretty tricky concepts when you're stranded on a space rock the size of an average-sized garbage dump); but the second piece of good news was how this blue sphere had just made me feel like a billion dollars.

Now that I was feeling like a new man, I was more dedicated than ever to the proposition of finding Arlene and exiting the nuclear plant. Easier said; Arlene's arrow pointed me to the blue sphere—but was that all? Maybe I should follow the arrow down the computer-room corridor, I thought, and forget the door leading to the patio. Then again, maybe she didn't even see the hidden door, and I just stumbled through it, misreading her arrow.

I returned to the computer room and headed in the direction of Arlene's arrow. After twenty minutes of winding through the maze, I ended up right back at the arrow again! "Well, that was a real brainstorm," I grumbled.

I decided to leave a small mark of my own, a simple F, next to her initials whenever I found them. This would prevent my mistaking one mark for the next—and anyone else, Arlene or maybe the "Ron" twins, who came this way again would know he was not alone.

I followed her mark again, this time picking a different route; and at last I made eye contact with some company, however unwelcome. One of the familiar brown monsters with the painful, white spikes was eating something, its back to me.

Up to now I'd been spared seeing them eat. It sat on a table, hunched over, making hard, crunching noises. I caught a glimpse of something red in its jaws as it turned its head to the side; fortunately, it didn't check its six.

If I'd found another shotgun by now, I would have blasted the blasphemy from behind . . . but sometimes frustration is the father of fortune, for suddenly I heard a whole bunch of the bastards walking right past me—on the other side of the thin, computer-maze wall.

If I had followed my gut instincts and shot the demon-ic son of a bitch, I would have been ambushed. Shaking from a retroactive adrenaline rush, I silently told myself that my objectives were to find Arlene and get the hell out of here, off Phobos, and find a radio somewhere!

Then a thought hit me like a ton of slag. Arlene wouldn't bother taking time in this

hellhole to scribble her mark unless she had a damned good reason. Not just to point out the sphere—if she knew it was there, she'd have used it herself like a good soldier.

The only logical conclusion was that the arrow pointed the way out of the nuclear plant—the way Arlene San-ders had already gone. Like Arne Saknussen, she marked her own trail for all who followed.

So why hadn't I found it? Same way Arlene missed the patio door: there had to be another hidden door nearby that I had missed.

Third time's the charm. The damned door couldn't have been more than five feet from the one I had found. One good push and it was open, leading to a beautiful piece of straight, well-lit corridor that reached its end with a clean, massive metal door that had printed on it the welcome letters EXIT—obviously a holdover from the plant's mundane days as a hangout for humans. Feeling bold and unstoppable, I walked right up to that door and discovered that it required a computer key card before it would bless the lonely traveler with an open sesame.

Great. Now I could be miserable again.

-10

Something I'd learned at age fourteen: when your mind is working, don't give it a reason to stop. I'd reasoned it out this far, fitting pieces into place. Why should I be stopped by one minor impediment?

When you welcome thoughts, they come. There had been something wrong about the sound of the crunching from the monster that was eating. At first I was certain it was chowing down on the remains of one of my comrades; but now I realized the sound was all wrong, too high, too sharp. And when I saw the color code on the EXIT door—bright red—I acted on my hunch.

I didn't want to run into any more of those monsters, so I took it nice and easy getting back to the one having its Happy Meal; with that troop trooping around some-where, silence was definitely golden. My main concern was that he might be gone. I needn't have worried.

Now I know why God invented bayonets.

The thing died gurgling without a scream, a roar, or a gunshot to call monsters from the vasty deep. I missed my chance to find out if I had another intellectual demon.

Flipping it on its back, I saw something red in its mouth—a clear, red, plastic computer key card on which it had been chewing. Next to it was a pile of plastic cards, mangled beyond repair, small red and blue globs suggesting the remains of more key cards. Fortunately, the one I carefully fished out of its mouth was still in one piece.

The red card worked; the exit door slid open, revealing an access ladder. I climbed down as quietly as I could. .. but I still hadn't found a new shotgun.

The toxin refinery; such a lovely name. The dump was another step down, in more ways than one. At first it seemed as though I'd entered a zone of peace and tranquility. Greeting me was a wide-open space lit by a sun lamp so bright that for a moment I thought I was back on Earth in the middle of a pleasant afternoon. The abundance of weird-looking machinery raised my suspicions, however; I could easily imagine monsters and zombies lurking behind equipment of that size.

As I began to explore the area, I was grateful for the first sight of a barrel full of the toxic sludge. I'd certainly changed my mind about green slime! Now that I knew the stuff was as explosive as nitro, finding it was like coming across another weapon.

I searched frantically for another mark by Arlene. I remembered another afternoon we spent at the rec-hall flicks. We watched one of those mad scientist movies, and the laboratory was stuffed with more switches and levers than humanly possible. The more I checked out the toxin refinery, the more it seemed like that make-believe lab.

Not all the switches had to be activated by hand, either. I made that discovery when I walked past a green section of wall, the color of a ripe avocado. The immediate whirring sound had me spinning around and ready for action. But nothing was coming to get me this time. The motion detector I had just activated stimulated my memory. CNET used to show us training videos, and I remembered that Union Aerospace used movable architecture to transport the liquid metals extracted from Phobos ore.

I watched the corridor behind me slowly shift out of sight; it sure beat the hell out of coming into a room and finding stone and metal that had grown scales or pulsing veins. No horror faces here! The bad part was that as the physical layout changed, the corridors would realign; the route in was no longer the route out.

With so many hidden triggers, I never knew when I was going to shift everything all over again. Stepping on a land mine would be a lot worse; but this situation was still unpredictable enough to be a major pain in the ass. I tried avoiding the sensor eyes, but they were too well hidden. Once a motion detector activated, I couldn't undo it; I had to love it or lump it.

When I tossed out the old religious baggage, I thought my superstitions had gone with it. Well, Phobos might not drag me back where the nuns wanted me, but it did reintroduce me to every superstition I ever had as a kid.

So the first thought that leapt to mind when something cold brushed my face was Ghosts! Peripheral vision warned me something was definitely there; but when I turned to face it, all I saw was a blur.

I was still debating when something big and fast knocked me on my ass. I still couldn't see it, but I figured any ghost that can knock you down is a ghost you can return the favor to.

Jesus and Mary, did I miss that shotgun now! The wide blast dispersion was tailor-made for shooting something you can't see. But if the rifle was all I had, the rifle was what I'd use. I was a Marine, damn it—and every Marine is a rifleman first.

Scrambling back from where I'd been attacked, I readied my Sig-Cow, aimed at nothing in particular, and waited for the first blurring of vision that meant either I was having a stroke or I'd found a new kind of monster.

The wall in front of me went a little watery, like something insubstantial was in front of it. Without staring and losing it, I fired four quick taps.

I expected to draw blood; I didn't expect an explosion. The ghost screamed and seemed to collapse; I wasn't sure. Then something hot and heavy pounded me from behind, and I finally tigged what had really happened: more damned fireballers! The first shot had missed me and killed my "ghost."

I whirled around, diving sideways; two spikys, two zombies, one big barrel of sludge. Ignoring the monsters, I concentrated fire on the stationary barrel. It took a couple of rounds then exploded spectacularly.

I wondered if my "intellectual" demon could spell

KA-BOOM?

I approached cautiously and examined the remains. At least the aliens' blood was red and the internal organs bore a strong resemblance to human plumbing. Just beyond the primary gore site I noticed another tangle of human arms and legs.

Catching my breath, I went closer. It was a relief when I saw the bits and pieces were from zombies; for a moment, I'd been worried.

It was Christmas when I saw the riot gun clutched in one severed hand . . . but it was Valentine's day, hearts and flowers, when I spotted the missing rocket launcher!

The shotgun was a little fancier than the last riot gun, a more old-fashioned model. It took the same twelve-gauge, but it also had a muzzle device so you could adjust the pattern spread for close work or far.

I allowed myself to feel real gratitude for the zombies, who were turning out to be my best pals. If not for them, I wouldn't have a single functional weapon. Even when the aliens deliberately destroyed radios, maps, and anything else decorative or useful, they had to keep their zombies armed. We don't come equipped with claws or armor plate. At least, not we guys.

Looking around, I was disappointed there was no one else to shoot. Then, as if receiving a good grade for a job well done, I spotted the glimmer of another A.S. on a distant wall.

I ran to look. It was! Arlene had come through again. Once again the arrow showed me where to go, and I wasn't complaining. It seemed like she had an uncanny knack for shadowing the demons until she found the way down.

Clipping the rocket launcher to my webbing gave me an odd feeling. I had thought to use it to frag myself; but Arlene and her Magic Markers changed that plan.

The rocket launcher was serious firepower. This one looked in good shape, but it didn't have the two pre-loaded rockets that were standard issue. I was going to have to make my one rocket round count. I loaded up then let it dangle.

Armed for very big bear, I followed Arlene's arrow through a narrow opening; I could barely squeeze past. The UAC designers evidently did not have big men wearing combat armor in mind when they built the "Manual Vertilift Bypass Route."

The doorway led to a spiral escalator down. It was not operating, so I crept down as silently as possible ... not very.

The escalator led down to the Command Control level, as I recalled from the map I had seen above. C&C was the nerve center; if there were any working radios in the facility, that's where I expected to find them.

Once there, I wondered if it had been worth the trip. The architecture of this place was the most depressing yet, heavy, gray, very much in the style of military garrisons from World War II. I had to wonder why any human would build thick, fortified walls deep inside Phobos—if a human had. Maybe we inherited this, too.

Making my way down the longest corridors I had seen yet, I was struck by the grotesque combination of black moments from human history with the inhuman qualities of the invader. A heavy whiff of diesel fumes had me coughing so badly I had to stop and catch my breath. Diesel fumes? That couldn't be right. But that's what I had smelled.

My footsteps echoed so loudly, they sounded like mortars. I was glad when I reached the first open space, if only because the echoes wouldn't be deafening. The kind of stone forming the floor changed, and the higher ceiling gave the sound somewhere to go.

I was at the edge of a huge room, shrouded in darkness except for a couple of shafts of bright light shining through glass skylights. I don't know whether there were spots behind the glass or whether I was seeing actual daylight; but the squares of brilliance lit up two spots as bright as freeway construction sites.

One of the two bright-lit squares contained a table; on top of the table was an AB-10 machine pistol. God, did I want that pistol! I could almost taste it. I stared from the doorway, trying to estimate the odds that the pistol was bait for a trap; I kept getting an unacceptably high probability.

Turning in the opposite direction, I crept along the wall, rolling each step, just as they'd taught us in SERE School and SurvInfil. Every few steps I stopped abruptly, listening for someone shadowing my footsteps.

I tracked the wall to the left, followed it for a right turn, and finally approached a hulking machine of some sort that almost touched the wall, leaving a slight gap. I slid through the gap as silently as I could and poked my head out.

What I saw made me smile grimly. Behind a pile of boxes, ten feet past the machine pistol, were no fewer than a dozen of those brown spinys who would never make Smokey the Bear's Christmas list. They were hiding behind the boxes, staring greedily at the well-lit gun and waiting for someone stupid enough to march up and try to grab it.

Allow me to introduce myself, . .

I let my new shotgun dangle, shouldering the mini-rocket-launcher instead. I only had one round, and I had never fired one of those things before; my first shot would have to be a damned good one.

I closed my eyes and visualized the UAC sales video: raise range finder; grab plastic propellant tag and pull—which mixes the volatiles and incidentally engages the primer firing pin; thumb-off safety; aim and squeeze trigger. Pulling the trigger halfway produced a tiny, red laser dot; I lovingly moved it across to sit directly on the rump of the biggest demon.

One of the other demons noticed the spot and reached out to touch it. I squeezed the trigger the rest of the way.

The rocket exploded with a bang so loud, I thought I would be permanently deaf. While my ears still rang, I dropped the rocket-launcher and retrieved my scattergun.

I humped toward the remains of the ambush crew; there were a few survivors, crawling along the ground looking for their legs and arms. I put them out of my misery.

I counted thirteen heads and fourteen left arms, so I must have slipped a digit somewhere. Shotgun in hand, I slowly approached the AB-10, alert for a second line of attack.

I was still seven meters away when I heard the sound, and it was a bad one; the worst one yet ... a low, piglike growl, a snuffling sound turning into a wet, animalistic grunt. I froze, the image of a giant boar filling my mind. Slowly, I backed away from the AB-10. I did not want to meet whatever made that noise.

-11

Damn! I thought, furious that even after ex-pending my only rocket, I couldn't get the machine pistol; I was right back where I started, except one rocket lighter. I had squandered my gift! I felt like the guy who found a lamp that would grant one wish, and he says, "Jeez, I wish I knew what to wish for."

I moved on, warier than before. The simplicity of the layout and the big blocks of stone made secret doors less likely here, although I would pause occasionally and try pushing against anything that looked remotely promising. The fact that the alien monsters had set a trap worried me; as I went deeper into the base, it seemed like they were getting smarter.

I was becoming concerned that I hadn't found any more messages from Arlene. Was I still following her trail, or did I take a wrong turn?

Through a doorway arch, I found another room with a light blue motif. The UAC logo was repeated regularly, over and over, in the floor; evidently, I was back in original, human architecture.

The room contained a number of kiosks, four that I could see. As I neared the center kiosk I must have triggered another of those motion detector switches. All the doors began to rise as one. A filth of aliens tumbled out, and this time I had no rocket and no

convenient barrels of toxin.

I fired a quick shell, dropping one; then the rest fell on me like ravenous in-laws. I dropped the shotgun to the ground and barely managed to swing my semi-auto Sig-Cow up to take the shock as the first alien hit me.

The damned thing impaled itself on my bayonet—but it was too stupid to die! It clawed forward, stopped only by the bayonet hilt, and grabbed my padded shoulders with death-grip talons, dragging me back against the wall.

Saved my hide, it did. The alien's broad back shielded me as its brethren flung their fiery, mucus wads; the fireballs burst, spraying flaming, red liquid that dribbled down my dance partner's legs to pool on the ground, lighting the room with a hellish, red glaze. I fired nine or ten times, finally blowing a hole clean through the alien ... a gory loophole through which I turned on the rest.

I guess they refused to believe that the firewads weren't frying me; they stubbornly kept throwing them, ignoring the burning pool around the feet of the first, dead monster. I got lucky; two of the aliens jostled, then turned on each other, fang and claw. The weakened survivor fell to a single shot from my Sig-Cow . . . abruptly, I realized I was alone with two hundred kilos of alien brochette on my bayonet. What a life!

Evidently, I had not met all my playmates yet. I decided I liked it that way.

The room had a central kiosk, which I entered. There was a blue security card in there. I grabbed it on the chance I'd find a use for it. Then it was back to the search for signs of Arlene.

Edging up a shallow set of steps, I finally found Arlene's next A.S. and arrow. Grinning, I followed her trail through a room stuffed with computers. Most of these centers had the same basic floor plan; but I was absolutely, one hundred percent unprepared to encounter a freaking swastika! Some sick joker had arranged eight Cray 9000s to form the "crooked cross" that a certain Austrian corporal had appropriated in the middle of last century. Maybe it was a coincidence, but I doubt it.

This was all getting a little too weird for me. The River Styx, zombies, demons, flaming skulls . . . what kind of intelligence was behind this? Whatever it meant, I decided not to think about it.

I could easily have gone through the computer room without noticing, but an undamaged map to the section made it impossible to ignore the swastika floor plan. My adventure with the kiosk had been dead center in the largest circle. Above it and slightly to the left was the swastika of the computer room. Walking through, one might figure it out. At

certain angles one couldn't help but recognize that the blood-red design of the floor had a certain association. The map was like a slap in the face.

It barely bothered me when I triggered another of those damned motion detectors. They were becoming routine by now. Of course, there was always some element of surprise. In this case, the swastika-crays lowered into the floor, real slow with a grinding sound like the bones of a million dead being rendered to powder, and I expected to see soul-shattering horror. Instead, I won another jackpot.

I'd just found two boxes of rockets, five to a box. And I found a yellow security card with a note that if I were trying to find the card where it was supposed to be, north of the "maze" at the northwest corner of the installation (maze? talk about feeling like a trapped rat), well, I wouldn't find it there because it was here instead. Safe and sound with the rockets. The note was signed A.S.!

Man, I was going to have a lot of questions for that girl when I found her. It was hard enough staying alive without going to a lot of trouble for a hypothetical fellow soldier, who on a wild off-chance might still be breathing and putting one foot in front of the other. She had performed incredible feats here. As Arlene found sup-plies along the way —everything from weapons and ammo to these ugly key cards—she took only what she could carry and stowed the rest where a thinking man might find it.

Anyway, the least I could do under the circumstances was load the battery-sized rockets into my pack (aside from the two I loaded into the launcher), pocket the yellow card next to the blue one, and blow this horror show.

I ran into one minor obstacle along the way. I should say I avoided it; I was just about to barge through a flimsy, narrow door, en route to the exit from Command Control, following Arlene's latest arrow, when I heard the horrible pig sound to which I'd taken an instant hatred. This time it was accompanied by heavy footfalls suggesting tons of flesh waddling ponderously in the artificial gravity of the base. These pig noises were sloppier, wetter, deeper than before.

Part of me wanted to kick in that door and face the creature; part of me had had enough. I had rockets; from the sound, this pig thing was made of flesh and blood—plenty of both to spare.

The rational part of me said I'd probably find out sooner rather than later whether I could kill this new monster or not. Why race it to the grave?

While I was having this debate with myself, the pig thing thumped-thumped on past the door. I waited a few more breathless minutes, then opened the door a crack and listened.

Nothing.

But the instant my book crossed the threshold, I heard a warning grunt from my right, down the black-dark hallway, followed by a heavy, meaty tread accelerating toward me like a main battle tank.

I could barely make out a bulky shape shambling out of the night to starboard; but directly in front of my nose was a heavy, armored door, a pressure hatch, rimmed with blue lights. I bolted across the corridor, jamming my hand in my pocket and fishing out both key cards.

The first one I tried turned out to be yellow. The door buzzed angrily, and I began to smell the rotten stench of corruption that comes from animals that chow-down on decayed carrion.

Swallowing panic, I yanked out the yellow and inserted the blue. The door chimed and ponderously rolled up; I darted through, unslung my scattergun, and waited, shaking, for the Thing Without a Name.

The heavy security door rolled shut, mocking me with its lethargy. Fortune loved me this time; slow as the door was, the nightmare was just that much slower. The door shut, and the frustrated pig-thing beat on the heavy metal and howled its rage and hunger.

And still I hadn't seen even one of the things in the light.

Knees weak, I followed a trail of three marks and three arrows to the next door—which wanted the yellow card, surprisingly enough. This door led to a lift that wasn't working, naturally; but the open shaft had guide cables along the sides, and that was good enough for the human Fly. I slid down almost fifty meters before finding another open lift door.

I swung through the hatch and saw the level-schematic on the wall; Welcome to Phobos Laboratories.

Five minutes in the Phobos lab convinced me that Command Control hadn't been all that bad. It didn't escape me that every time I went to a new center, it was a level farther down than the previous one. Living conditions were not improving, not by a long shot. However, none of that really mattered. If Arlene had come this way, then so would I. I had to find her; I had to find any other human survivors.

All of this made a lot of sense to me intellectually. Emotionally, I was willing to jettison honor, duty, and loyalty and run like a thief as I contemplated my first real swim in the toxic goo. Semper fi, Mac.

I'd talked myself into wading through the toxin way up above, and the protective boots that were part of the armor sizzled like bacon on the griddle. But the material was plenty thick, and the corrosive liquid hadn't reached my tender flesh yet. And like last time, there was no way around the horrible stuff.

Got to be some way to avoid full body immersion, I thought. But without a heavy-duty flashlight that I didn't have and wouldn't dare show if I did, damned if I could find it.

Arlene's arrow pointed across the pool. Grudgingly, I had to admit there was no way to proceed without a little swim.

I was damned glad for the edge that blue face-sphere had given me when it exploded all over me, making me feel healthier than I have in years. If ever I needed that edge, it was now.

I took a deep breath. Then I took a few more. Man, I did not want to do this! But it was the only way to get past a wall that blocked me from going any farther along the trail Arlene blazed; I had to go under the damned thing. Thinking of how much I hated monsters from beyond the stars, I splashed down.

Only one advantage over before: this time, I was prepared for the freezing pain, so it wasn't quite as unexpectedly horrible. Just a throbbing ache that sapped my strength, leaving me enervated and gasping for breath. One way or the other, the swim wasn't going to last very long. The toxin glowed with an eerie, green phosphorescence, and the light helped a little. It showed me a metallic object that I would have missed otherwise.

I snagged it in passing, a small, hand-sized television thing, showing a ghostly schematic.

If I struggled, I could pretend the liquid was nothing but an algae-infested swimming hole I'd haunted as a kid. Yes, I wanted to think about water instead of the thick, toxic crap I was in right now.

The wall did not extend all the way to the bottom of the pool. I pinched my nose, squeezed my eyelids tight, and ducked underneath. I was starting to tremble in the icy liquid; I felt sick, like a monster flu.

Then I surfaced as fast as the law of buoyancy allows, grabbing the opposite catwalk, and the swim was over. Air never tasted better, even the stinking stuff in this place. Two or three breaths later, I put the breathing filter back in place. Too bad I hadn't had a full environment suit with its own oxygen supply, but I'd already regretted that absence before and nothing came of it. A Marine couldn't have everything.

For example, I couldn't keep the blue glow forever. I had taken it for granted until I realized what this swim could mean. Now I felt sapped and drained. I was all set to curse my lousy luck until I realized something very important: without that earlier boost to my system, this dunk in the sludge would have killed me.

So what about Arlene? Could she have come this way? Could I have passed her body in the green murk? Had to think this through—there was no arrow immediately beyond the toxin; maybe she found a better route. She might have a decent flashlight or light-amp goggles so she could see. Or she might have had a full environment suit.

Or what the hell, maybe she had a touch of the blue medicine show. There were all kinds of ways she could have survived.

But maybe she didn't. I refused to think about it.

It was time to move on.

-12

I was back to trusting the old Fly instincts again. There were plenty of more unreliable things, such as any decision by Lieutenant Weems. Hadn't thought of Weems for a while. My lip curled; Weems was probably the first zombie; reworking him would take the least amount of effort.

I felt something in my hand. I stared—the thing I'd fished out of the sludge! I held it up close, staring in confusion. Then it clicked—it was a map, a video schematic of the labs. Jesus and Mary ... I guess even the greenest cloud can have a silver-screen lining.

I decided to follow the same road map I'd been on for several levels now: down, down, down ... no reason to stop. I might as well see what was at the very bottom level—which, according to the map I'd seen in the nuclear plant, was the main computer station, two floors down. But in the absence of Arlene marks, I'd have to plan the route myself. . . just as soon as I could make tops and bottoms out of my new toy.

I suddenly felt a wave of weakness and fever; I hoped I hadn't already given myself a death sentence from the toxin.

Phobos Lab was dark. Phobos Lab stank like an open sewer. But if there was anything left of the original installation here, then medical supplies had to be near at hand, if they hadn't been left in the typical condition of guns and radio sets. I picked that as my first priority; I needed an all-purpose antitoxin and a stimulant.

Leaning against a wall for support, I found a weapons locker the hard way: I leaned against it and the door collapsed inward.

Guns! I pawed through my treasure trove, scooping up as much ammo as I could shovel into my pack. Then I stared in reverence; beneath the shells and bullets rested a state-of-the-art, AB-10 machine pistol. The question was, did it still work after scores of zombies and spinys had monkeyed with it?

I checked it out, cleaned the barrel, then reloaded it. I almost pulled the trigger to do the only test that really counts, but stuck to my original policy of not making any more noise than was absolutely required.

I cleaned the machine pistol as thoroughly as I could before adding it to my arsenal. There was little doubt of this lethal package receiving a test real soon, with a real target, and hopefully with a margin of error to try something else if it failed. The best choice might be to have the pistol in one hand and the shotgun in the other. Nothing wrong with insurance, even if it made me feel a bit like a Wild West gunfighter.

As I stood, shifting the backpack to be more comfort-able and finding a place for all the weapons, a sudden attack of dizziness hit me like a grenade. Medical attention had just become my number-one priority again.

I studied my hand map, working the buttons to make the pretty picture slide up and down. First task was to find me—no helpful "You Are Here" on this puppy. At last I found the wall crossing a trench ... no sign of toxic sludge on the map, of course.

I must have been living right, because the nearest infirmary—marked with a red cross—was located just a quarter klick away, spitting distance. I found it, and there wasn't a single monster doctor or devil nurse. Here I'd been expecting a typical medical establishment and was pleasantly surprised.

And there were lights, the first fully operational light I'd found in the complex. If the lights had survived, maybe the doctoring stuff was still here and intact.

I resisted the impulse to cross my fingers as I unlatched and opened the first promising cabinet. Mother lode . . . thanks, Mom. I removed a Medikit with the seal still unbroken and popped her open. Inside were bandages, antitoxin compounds, even ointment for burns. (My face still felt as hot as if I had a sunburn, for which I could thank a fireball instead of a weekend at the beach.)

I found a clean room, a metal table next to a mirror, all kinds of light, even a shower cubicle. It was time for Dr. Taggart to make a house call.

I didn't do too badly, really. First off, I locked the doors, turned out all the lights except the one in the room with the table and the shower, placed the shotgun right up against the stall, where I could grab it in a second, and, facing the closed office door the entire time and leaving the shower door ajar, I took the risk of bathing.

Sick as I'd been feeling since immersing myself in the ooze, the mere act of washing it all away made me feel considerably better. I turned the nozzle for Hot up as high as I could stand it and felt the cuts and bruises sting, then feel better. My burned face didn't get anything out of the shower but pain, but the rest of my body was doing too well for me to care.

If the shower was heaven, then the fresh towel was a piece of Eden. Here I had struck a mortal blow against the shores of hell. The rest was pretty simple. I put antibiotic and bandages on the worst of my wounds and cuts, taped my bruised ribs (didn't even remember where I got them), and took my time smearing the cold, soothing ointment on the burns.

The only moment when Doc Taggart almost failed his patient was when he—when I—noticed thirty or forty hypodermics, all neatly labeled GENERAL STIMULANT. I don't like needles. Never have.

But there was good reason to pick up one of those needles and give myself a shot. Just as good a reason to pack some in shock-proof carriers and take them along. I could run into Arlene, and she might need a lift. I might run into some other survivor. And if I were going to do all that, the only reasonable thing was for me to give myself an injection first.

You don't need to do that, said the little voice in my head. Just find another blue-faced sphere.

I argued with the voice: "It might be a once in a lifetime fluke. I can't count on that happening again." That's when I noticed that I was talking to myself. Sheeesh, all this just to avoid sticking myself with a needle!

No more. I bravely wielded the needle, got out the alcohol and cotton swab. This couldn't be any worse than what I'd been going through lately. Well, not by much anyway.

I wolfed some food from the small refrigerator, then hunted for a flashlight. Alas, all I found was one of those pencil-beam lights; if I wanted to find out if a zombie had a sore throat, or any throat at all, I was set.

According to my map, I had to go north to find some sort of route down. At least my

compass was still functioning. I hated to leave, but the infirmary had done its job. I was tired, not exhausted, hungry, not starving, and not shaking like I had amebic dysentery. The only problem, aside from demons, two-legged pigs, and murderous corpses, was that I had lost Arlene's trail; if she were hurt, laying up somewhere, I might accidentally leave her behind on an upper level. The point was that I could concentrate again.

The last thing I did before stepping out again into the dark was check the boots. They'd held up better than I thought, but I stuffed some pillowcases in for added insulation.

Outside, it was just as dark as before, but I wasn't as bothered this time; the human race may not have blue spheres, but we do all right. I stayed in that frame of mind as I went north. I scuttled along the corridors, letting my shotgun peek around corners first, until I reached a huge chamber. It was dark, but not the pitch-black I had just come from. At least I could tell I had entered a larger area.

The next moment I was under attack. Claws raked across the shoulder plates of the battle armor I had just reinforced. When I tried to fend off the enemy, I half expected to feel the crocodile-type hide of the spiked monsters; but instead, my hands sank into a pulpy mass. And the contact made my flesh crawl even through my thick gloves.

The light was on, and I should have been able to see the scum, but I was getting nothing. Then as I pushed against the jellylike stuff and took a few faltering steps back, I saw a familiar shimmering. The same thing I'd seen when I thought I was fighting a ghost. That time, the issue was resolved by a miracle fireball; this time, I was on my own.

Didn't this goddamned, jelly-shimmering, half-assed, invisible son of a bitch know the rules? Ghosts can't hurt people—they can only scare them to death! Then the Caspar pounded me, knocking me back on my butt and kicking the wind out of me. I thanked Mary for the armor as I shoved the barrel of the shotgun right into the shimmering effect and pulled the trigger, hoping that if this thing had a mouth, that was exactly where he was going to get it.

I don't know if I killed it. I don't know if it can be killed. But it didn't bother me anymore after that. Not liking the idea of being followed by more invisible spooks, I jogged for a while, hoping to be done with this part as soon as possible. I also kept both eyes open for a pair of light-amp goggles, but I'd used up my good luck quotient at the infirmary.

To exit the labs, I had to enter the darkest room yet, black as coal. I wasn't surprised. This was at the north end of the installation, where, after groping in the dark by touch and even daring to use my tiny penlight, I finally found a small opening. This led down a narrow corridor to a tight, metal, spiral staircase going down—way down. I started to

get very dizzy, spinning around so many times.

Central Processing had more tight, narrow corridors than anywhere else on Phobos. Good thing I'm not claustrophobic. The light was better than the labs; but that's like saying L.A. cab drivers are more polite than cab drivers in Mexico City.

And at long, long last, I found another A.S.! I stared at it, overwhelmed by inappropriate emotion. She was alive! She got this far! Relief was a physical thing, perched on my back.

The arrow pointed to a branching corridor that seemed small enough to give a midget a backache; but crawling down it was a good move. At the other end was a completely intact map of this section. The bad guys must have been getting careless lately. If this kept up, I might find a functioning radio.

Central Processing was laid out in a rough triangular shape. Made me think of a robot riding a motorcycle. Maybe I was more wasted than I realized.

The southeast corner was made up of four interconnected rooms. A warning note was attached that three motion detector triggers will close any door in the facility for a span of thirty seconds as a security precaution. I could just see myself getting caught in a room with wall-to-wall enemies while I counted off: "Thirty, twenty-nine, twenty-eight . . . notify next of kin."

Unfortunately, I couldn't take the map with me, unless I ripped it out of the wall and dragged it along, and my hand map still showed the labs above; if there were a way of changing the view, I couldn't find it.

It occurred to me that we humans needed to learn everything possible about these bastards; otherwise, Earth was a sitting duck. We couldn't shoot it out with these things and expect to survive. We had to outsmart them—or die.

I was surprised that I had survived this long. I was a pretty good Marine. There was no false modesty about that. But Arlene was remarkable; if I could survive, surely she could! Hoped she would keep it up. Hoped I would, too; but this nonsense couldn't go on forever.

As I looked at the map, I knew, I just knew, that the thirty-second security rule about doors meant there was a welcoming committee waiting for me. Well, you knew the job was dangerous when you took it, Fly. They'll get you in the end.

But who were "they?"

They weren't the pitiful wrecks that looked human though dead inside. They weren't the spinys or metal skulls or ghosts, either. The one making snuffling pig sounds gave me the creeps; but somehow I knew the creature was mentally no more than an animal. If I hadn't encountered the one monster who enjoyed talking, I'd be tempted to conclude we were being invaded by an alien barnyard.

But the intelligence was there; just well-hidden. Even without the talking demon, the alien technology itself was proof of a "mastermind."

So why didn't the intelligence simply organize the monsters and zombies into a naval search pattern and be done with it? Why were Arlene and I being allowed to play Gypsy, entering one level after another, shooting it out with pretty much the same cast of characters, en-countering the same hazards . . . and beating them over and over and over again?

Maybe it was all a pre-invasion test, or worse still, a sadistic game. But test or game, it had to be teaching the Enemy Mind something important. The important question for the survival of the human race was: What the hell was I learning?

I hated to admit it, but so far the answer was not much.

-13

One thing I was learning, though: speed. While I debated the finer points of philosophy with myself, a mob of zombies and spinys burst through the door at the back end of the corridor, the one I'd come through myself, as if they owned the damned place; they noticed me and tore down the narrow corridor. I did not take longer than a microsecond to resolve the question—I ran like a bat out of hell, a bat trying to get the hell out of hell. Although finding the commanding officer of the invasion was an important issue, I decided it could wait until later for review. Much later.

With this many of the enemy breathing down my neck, the shotgun was useless. Maybe my new machine pistol would have worked . . . but what I already had in my hands was the rocket launcher.

For an instant I considered the narrow corridor that might channel the blast right back in my face, the proximity of the nearest spiny ... for an instant. Then I dug my heel in and spun, ready to rock 'n' roll.

The explosion was so loud that I didn't hear it. I felt it. A giant, invisible hand threw me to the ground. My eyes were open, and I saw the whole contingent that was on my tail

vanish in a spray of blood and fire.

The sight was something to think about; especially since it was the last sight I saw.

I must have lost consciousness. An indeterminate time later, I began to hear a sound, too loud and annoying to sleep through. Like all the church bells the penguins ever rung at me, all the bells in the world in my head. I still couldn't see anything, just a bright afterimage.

It was about fifteen minutes before the bells were replaced by a buzzing sound, then the slosh-slosh of blood in my ears. I would have been easy pickin's, as Gunny Goforth would say. Maybe I was saved by looking as dead as the rest of them.

When I was able, I crawled along the corridor, dragging my feet. There was no time to examine my possessions. One thing for certain: if those glass syringes were still in one piece inside their supposedly shock-proof container, I'd be giving more product endorsements.

Shaking my head clear and staggering to my feet, I finally made it to the one long, spacious corridor in the otherwise cramped, tight, ore-processing center. This one was well marked on the map I'd studied—the only route to what the map indicated were the stairs down. Judging from the red and gold and brown streaks on the rough walls, this corridor had been carved right out of the rock of Phobos. I liked it and hoped it wouldn't be reworked into something sickening.

Halfway down the corridor, I suddenly felt light-headed and my stomach broke loose from its moorings. At first I thought I was experiencing more symptoms from the rocket blast. Then I realized what was happening. No one goes to space without experiencing zero-g, and you never forget it. This was damned close enough! I should have studied the map more closely when I had the chance . . . the middle section of this corridor must pass outside the ancient, alien gravity-zone.

A handrail was installed for the obvious reason. Grabbing it, I pulled myself along; a single tug was enough to overcome friction in Phobos's minuscule natural gravity. I'd spent enough time on the ship to Mars that this was simple enough, unless I had the bad luck to be attacked right now; I'd never taken zero-g combat training.

Pulling myself around a corner, I floated practically into the arms of a triplet of spinys. Luck has never been my long suit. But these leathery bastards were walking on the walls and ceiling, as if they enjoyed their own, personal gravity that followed them around, each oriented in a different direction.

One more piece of evidence that they were unbeatable. Then one of them looked right at

me and spoke: “Gosh —are we having a ball, or what?”

It hocked a loogie into its hand, where the mucus immediately burst into flame.

My hog leg was tucked in the webbing at my back, and there was no room to draw it in this corridor, no time to work it free. The demon raised the flaming ball of snot, grinning like a goblin.

I threw my head back, rotating my body in the microgravity. I didn’t bother drawing the shotgun; when I rotated my body so the barrel was pointing at that cracked and grinning face, I fired.

A lucky shot. Blew its head clean off. Guess my luck’s not so abysmal after all.

The blast acted like a rocket, propelling me backward. When I stopped spinning, I grabbed the rail, drew the shotgun free, and pulled myself back where I’d left off.

The two remaining monsters had forgotten all about me; they were fighting each other, claws dug into throats, bloody drool trickling down wrinkled chins and bursting into flame.

Was it possible, just one “brain” to a set? Kill the mastermind, and the rest turn on each other?

Evidently, the Mind behind the invasion had the power to manifest itself through only one or two individuals in a group.

I tucked that one away in the hindbrain; I would use it later.

I waited politely until one brain-dead spiny offed the other; then I rewarded the victor with the spoils: a twelve-gauge blast to the face, this time with my back braced against the wall.

I hauled ass along the corridor to the gravity zone. At the far north end of the facility, I found a switch that opened a door leading to the stairway where I could process myself right out of Central Processing.

Down one flight on the spiral, metal-grate stairway, the Computer Station welcomed me with a thin layer of green sludge. At this point I just didn’t care. I was willing to jump into the ooze and slog through it as long as my boots held out. I wanted out of here! I ran without stopping until I discovered that whatever crap-for-brains idiot designed this playground set it up so you go around in circles before noticing you were going around in circles.

The Computer Station was a haze of forgetfulness. It started out badly when I couldn't find an Arlene mark. I hunted along every passageway without luck; either she followed a totally different route and our paths did not cross, or more likely, she had a reception committee waiting for her when she climbed down the ladder, and she was in a running firefight until she found a bolt-hole.

The damnedest part was, this was the lowest level, so far as I knew. If they finally ran her to ground, I should have found her ... or her remains. There was nowhere else for Arlene to go.

There were few monsters on this floor; I shot a couple of spinys in the back—hey, I'm not proud—but mostly avoided the patrols.

En route, I picked up two blue key cards and three yellows, plucking one off the "dead" body of a zombie. Something or someone had gnawed off its legs and one arm; it was still animate as I approached, and tried to bite me; but I was faster (and more ruthless). I blew its brains out, putting it out of misery, and took the key card tucked into its belt.

I found two maps, both burned beyond recognition. But by sheer persistence, I finally found it: one of those big, metallic doors that like to stand between me and where I want to go. One of those key-card teases that demand you stick it in.

But this bitch had a special feature—an irritating, unisex, nasally, parking-lot ticket-machine voice, the kind that says "Please take the ticket," as if you're a bumpkin from Mad Dog, Arkansas, who's never seen a car park before. No monster could ever create such a surreal torture device of art. It took a human touch.

"Hello," it said, "to exit the Computer Station, please insert your gold security card now."

All right; I supposed yellow was as good as gold. I inserted the card, and the cheap trick chirped "Thank you. To exit the Control Station, please insert your blue security card now."

I began to hear screams behind me, up the corridor; the damned door had probably notified "security" while it deliberately delayed me. I fumbled the blue key card into the slot—but I knew exactly what was coming.

"Thank you. To exit the Computer Station, please insert your red security card now."

If there were a red key card anywhere on this level, I was a purple-assed baboon.

And I didn't become a Marine to put up with this crap.

Even the spinys were less frustrating than this!

But I had a solution. Last time I'd fired a rocket, I'd made the mistake of standing too damned close. So I made sure I got far away from that smug bitch of a door, placing myself squarely behind a column and part of a staircase.

I fired both rockets from the launcher simultaneously. Just to be sure. The result was outstanding, excellent, a credit to the Corps. As loud as it was, it didn't deafen me this time. At this distance, the head gear worked like it was supposed to.

I walked through the smoking ruins of that bloody door with a sense of satisfaction greater than when I'd winged that toxin barrel and taken out a roomful of zombies with one bullet. I'd struck a blow against the True Evil, the chowderheaded humans who designed these installations!

From now on I refused to worry about plastic cards and security keys. Nothing could stop me. Then I found the lift that should have taken me out of there—the lift at the very end of the facility, my reward for having all the stupid cards.

The entire shaft was filled with human and animal remains, a hellish grain elevator. I don't know how long I stood there, staring stupidly. Then nausea overwhelmed me and I vomited for several minutes. Weak and shaky, I thought for several more minutes that I had climbed the farthest down I could go in the Phobos installation. A dead end. Nowhere to go but back the way I came. I knew I couldn't make it, but I was long past crawling into a corner and playing fetus. I'd go down fighting if I went, hoping somehow Arlene had escaped what was a death trap for me.

Even though it was a long shot, I thought again of the possibility of blowing up Phobos. Better that than let these bastards win! Then I noticed a foul, blood-red, evil-glowing circle in the floor; it had not been there a moment ago. A ghastly stench arose from the orifice, like human flesh frying on the griddle. I once missed getting firebombed by a Kerifistani terrorist; I was on guard duty at the Marine Corps compound when the main barracks went up. Thirty-three buddies burned to death. You never forget that smell.

They transferred me to Fox Company within forty-eight hours.

This hole pulsed like a heartbeat. There was a "ladder" made of light pink, fleshy cords that appeared to sweat.

I didn't have to be a rocket scientist to know that no human ever made this baby. Besides, this wasn't a job for a rocket scientist; this was a job for someone rock stupid enough to be a Marine. Resigned, I slung my shotgun and rifle, bolstered the machine pistol, and started climbing down the sticky, wet, springy ladder.

At the bottom there was plenty of light, at least; a sickly reddish light. The flesh-pit ladder dropped me into the largest corridor I'd seen yet. I would have said it was carved out of the rock of this moon, the same as Phobos Lab, but the inside of the walls seemed to perspire, like the ladder. Holding my breath and looking close, I saw hundreds, thousands, of small orifices opening and closing to the same steady beat as the red circle above. I decided that I'd done enough close examination for a lifetime.

Then, by God, I saw it—another A.S., biggest one yet! Even in the heart of hell, I was cheered to know I wasn't alone. I didn't exactly whistle a tune, but I smiled grimly.

Arlene's mark was accompanied by a crude drawing of a skull and crossbones with an arrow pointing straight ahead. A second arrow pointed out a narrow slit in the wall, a slit that was a friendly hole-in-rock, not pulsating or anything disgusting; a slit into what looked to be the outside. We were hundreds of meters below the surface of tiny Phobos, but there was goddamn daylight coming through that opening.

But that was one mother of a narrow crack. Could I get through that? Could Arlene, even? I touched the edge of the slit—tacky blood, a couple of hours old, tops. Mary, Mother of God... I had a vision. She had gone out, right there. She shoved herself so hard, tearing at that crack, that she flayed off huge strips of skin—but she didn't care. She wanted out; she wanted out bad; she wanted out right then, not five seconds later.

Leading me to the obvious conclusion: Arlene had seen something up ahead that even she was too terrified to face.

-14

I stared at the skull and crossbones. Whatever was up ahead was bad enough for Arlene to claw her way through a tiny crack in the wall rather than face it. Yet she wasted precious seconds leaving the warning for Yours Truly.

Thank God I didn't have to solve the mystery of the skull and crossbones. Getting through that crack would be an achievement all by itself.

Ahead I began to hear a low, slow pounding, almost like someone beating on a monster drum a mile distant. Well, I could take that—so long as it stayed there. I struggled out of my armor and pressed my right arm and shoulder into the crack.

But there I stuck. I braced my foot against the floor and shoved; several minutes and several pounds of flesh later, I was utterly convinced I could never fit through that crack unless I dismembered myself and threw the pieces through one at a time. Wonder if I'll

seriously consider that option when I see what's ahead? I thought.

So now what? I sat on the floor, pounding my head with my hand in frustration. If I went forward, I was on my own. Arlene was no coward ... if the Thing ahead scared the bejesus out of her, enough that she forced her way through a crack several sizes too small—then what in God's name was it?

Numbly, I stood, pulling on the armor again. As Mehitabel the cat said to Archie the cockroach, wotthehell, wotthehell I already roamed the halls of the damned; what did I have to lose? I suppose I could sit here and starve to death.

Shaking, I moved forward at snail speed, loaded rocket launcher in hand; but what if I found myself eyeball-to-eyeball with . . . with whatever It was? A rocket up the nose might piss it off—but at point-blank range, it would also fry Corporal Fly!

Ahead, I found an old-fashioned wooden elevator next to an old-fashioned rusted button. Somehow they seemed to fit right in here. In a place with living ladders, a few museum places were hardly out of line.

I pushed the button. With a slow grinding sound, the Sift began to descend. So far so good. It reached ground level, and I clumped aboard. What the hell else could I do? There was one button, and I pushed it.

The lift creaked and groaned, like it was a hundred years old, announcing my arrival to anyone inside. I braced, wondering whether to shift to the shotgun. Then it stopped up one floor . . . and my God, I saw what was inside!

On a pair of iron thrones sat the largest, reddest, most horrible demons I could imagine, compared to which the other guys were fit for hosting kiddie shows on Saturday mornings. Giant minotaurs with goat limbs for legs, and curling, savage horns on the top of their flat, broad heads. The chests and arms were carved from pure muscle. Their claws were so vicious that there was no comparison to the puny stuff I'd seen up until now.

Princes of hell. . .

And they were looking directly at me. So far, so bad.

I froze, whimpering like a Cub Scout. All I could think was, Oh Lord, the sisters were right all along!

The hell-prince on the left rose, trumpeting a marrow-freezing roar of discovery.

Come on, come on, come on, Fly! Snap out of it; get the hell out of Dodge! I hated every minute of every day of basic at Parris Island—and I bow at Staff Sergeant Stern's feet and kiss his shiny boots for every second of it: my training kick-started my paralyzed legs even while my brain was struggling to remember the Lord's Prayer ... all I could get was "Hail, Jesus," and I knew that was wrong.

Faster than I thought myself capable, I bolted—but forward, right at the things—and skirted between the forest of red legs and into the black-dark beyond! If they'd been any smaller, they would have had my head for lunch.

I ran across a long stretch of floor and heard the familiar pig snorts left and right. I ran through utter blackness until I hit a wall, banging my shins. I hardly noticed. There I spun, snarling, fishing for my riot gun.

If the porcine sons of bitches wanted Fly Taggart, they could bloody well take him . . . but not cheaply!

They were converging on me; I could hear their snufflings and hungry growls. What the hell; I was dead anyway, right? I raised the shotgun and pounded a shell straight in front of me.

One of the pig-demons screamed in pain. Oh ... you mean they can be hurt? I'd been wondering.

I scuttled right; the wall came to a point, folding back on itself. I slipped around and immediately barked my already-bruised shin on a barrel of that green, toxic mess.

Staring into the sickly glow, I had a shimmer of an idea. Quickly, before I could think twice and decide against it, I heaved over the barrel. The goo spilled out of the 120-liter drum . . . and now my whole corner was lit by a hellish, green glow. I could see!

I was in a pointy corner amid a forest of toxin barrels; but the monsters coming after me were still invisible. I was under attack by ghosts . . . and the ghosts and the pig-things were evidently one and the same.

But Yours Truly, Flynn Taggart, never forgets a scam.

I backed away from the flickering shadows, into the

actual point. Maybe I couldn't see them, but they sure as hell could see me; they charged.

I shot. Not a ghost; I shot a barrel.

The explosion chain-reactioned, and I dived for the deck. Too late, I remembered the ten or eleven rockets in my bandoleers. Luckily, the explosion stopped just short of me.

When the acrid rain of toxic waste stopped falling, I jumped to my feet. My entire body resonated, and my inner ear was confused; I balanced precariously on my hind legs, shotgun wavering up, down, and sideways . . . but my ghosts appeared to have died—again. At least, they didn't attack.

Staring wildly around the room, now lit by the green glow of ten thousand droplets of toxin sprayed far and near, I realized to my surprise that the room was actually a huge, star-shaped chamber. That seemed right in line with everything else. If they could have swastikas, why not star-chamber proceedings? Alas, my restful reverie was short-lived; the hideous hell-princes had seen my explosion and come to investigate.

But this time, I knew what to expect. Nuns or no nuns, I told myself over and over that these were alien life-forms, not demons. They couldn't be real demons, could they? Hell was a myth—wasn't it?

I raised my rocket launcher and let the first hell-prince have it at forty meters. The blast blew the motherless bastard backward, but it got to its feet. I couldn't believe it!

I fired a second time, pack-loaded with one smooth move, and shot a third rocket. The giant got up again and now it was joined by its comrade. This was not going according to plan.

They pointed their clawed hands at me; but instead of the usual balls of flaming snot, these "demons" fired green energy pulses out of wrist-launchers. I hugged the dirt as the stuff crackled over my head and made every hair on my head stand on end. Not very demonic, but pretty damned deadly!

My turn again; in desperation, I pumped rocket number four at the first hell-prince, and at last it seemed to do some damage. It got to its feet slowly and seemed confused about where I was. There was no reason to even try bothering the new one if I couldn't find out what repeated hammering did to the first minotaur. Yeah, minotaurs. They weren't demons; that Greek, Theseus, killed one.

Reload, rocket five, and finally that did the trick: number one went down and didn't get up again. But with behavior I was starting to expect from all godless creatures, it reached up a clawed hand and grabbed the other hell-prince.

Number two struggled to free itself, and I seized my opportunity. Screaming like a banshee, I charged to just out of range of its reach. Enraged, it slashed furiously; but my prayers were answered, and it was too mad to think of shooting energy bolts. I leaned in

to shove the launcher right down the creature's enormous, howling mouth. And Fly let fly ...

I won't even try to describe its breath.

The minotaur swallowed the little rocket, about the relative size of a multivitamin, and was literally blown away. I was knocked silly by the blast at such close proximity.

I came to, surprised to be coming to. Losing conscious-ness in a place like this seemed like a one-way ticket to oblivion.

I was lying on the floor of the same enormous, star-shaped chamber; but the walls had fallen, crumbling into constituent bricks outside, leaving the way clear to the outside. That whole concept of "outside" bothered me. Why wasn't I a corpse-side, floating in space?

There was air to breathe. There was an overcast sky to watch, complete with low-hanging clouds; dark clouds before a storm. Wherever I was, it sure as hell wasn't Phobos.

I found a platform behind the building. There was a switch. I pressed it and watched a stairway slowly rise. Wotthehell. Archie, wotthehell... I walked up the stairs.

At the very top was a Gate ... a working Gate. It was marked by a flickering symbol that gave me a splitting headache when I tried to concentrate on the design. I approached it, eyes averted.

And damn me if there wasn't Arlene Sanders's last mark, right next to the Gate, pointing directly at the symbol. She'd written a single word: OUT?

I didn't know. But I didn't hesitate a moment. If that were the way Arlene went.. .

Then that was where I was going.

Without a glance back, I stepped aboard.

-15

Time had no meaning for Fly Taggart—the memory of being Fly Taggart. He had no body but retained a consciousness somehow, somewhere. A sense of motion, but that might only be another memory.

Remembering a hand created a hand. Remembering a foot resulted in the sensation of a foot, a painful sensation from where his ankle had been bruised. Memory of a backache condensed into a patch of flesh and blood that was a back.

Memory of breath turned emptiness into a pair of lungs. Recollections of hot days on a summer beach left their imprint on a forehead slick with sweat.

Then he had a whole body, floating in a warm current of air slowly cooling; an upside-down vertigo turning his stomach, which meant he had a stomach. The fall wasn't long, and he skinned his knees on a hard metal surface before falling forward on his face. The air was cold.

He blinked eyes in an aching head. He couldn't see anything but white and red spots chasing each other across afield of darkness. The man panicked at the thought that he'd been blinded; but gradually vision returned. There wasn't much worth seeing.

The light was dim. He wanted to breathe fresh air again, as he had before stepping on the platform. He'd been breathing the stale air of spaceships and the Mars station and the Phobos installations for so long he'd almost forgotten what fresh air was like. Even if it had been fake, he wanted it again. But when he filled his lungs, it was that disgusting sour-lemon smell he had first noticed when he killed his first zombie. He was a man again, but he didn't want to be back in hell. Yet he had traveled somewhere, hadn't he? He felt he'd come a very long way just to reach . . .

I didn't know where I was. Instinctively, I reached with my left hand for the machine pistol, the weapon I could most quickly bring into play. My hand slapped bare flesh. There was nothing on my chest but air, I looked down and saw that I was naked.

Jesus and Mother Mary. And after all that work gathering shotgun, Sig-Cow, and rocket launcher.

Having lost my clothes during the strange journey didn't bother me, except for the drop in temperature; but I didn't want to turn into dead meat because I didn't have weapons. A naked man is an unarmed man.

I wasn't going to waste another second before reconnoitring. If there were monsters anywhere near here, then I had to get my hands on a firearm right away. The sour-lemon smell was a dead giveaway—zombies lurked somewhere in the shadows. I'd come through a gateway with nothing but my body, but at least I was breathing. I wanted to keep it that way.

The gravity was Earth normal. As my eyes adjusted to dim light, I saw I was in an oblong, rectangular building. Having had the experience of being "outside" before the

transfer. I didn't look forward to roaming corridors again. I almost hated that idea more than the prospect of fighting monsters.

Suddenly it didn't feel merely cool any longer. It had gotten downright cold. Being stark naked presented other problems; with all the disgusting ways to die I had recently discovered, I'd be damned if I wanted to catch my death of cold.

Adrenaline pumping madly—my drug of choice—I ran in the most promising direction. A red light pulsed dimly in the shadows directly ahead; and the flat, slap-ping sound of bare feet against the metal floor seemed almost as loud as my boots had earlier.

If this setup were anything like the one I'd left, I actually wanted to find a zombie! "Alive" or dead, they were armed with what I needed, and a lot easier to deal with than the spinys or ghosts.

I found the source of the red light: an entire wall emitted crimson illumination; at the bottom was an inverted-cross cut-out, just big enough to serve as a doorway. It was directly in line with a square platform on the ground. The platform was red, too. The symbolism was blasphemy—anyone walking through the "door-way" would have the privilege of being crucified. The religious imagery was starting to piss me off; whoever or whatever was behind this had learned things about human psychology that I preferred it not know. I slipped through, feeling dirty and corrupted.

I felt an unholy chill as I walked through the inverted cross in the red wall, the color of communion wine, the color of blood from fallen comrades.

How right I was to think of buddies lost in battle. Directly on the other side of the opening was the dead body of a UAC technician locked in mortal embrace with a soldier I recognized from Fox Company. I wasn't likely to forget Ordover.

The youngest kid in the outfit, we'd bagged on him something fierce. He was patriotic to the "Corps" and easy to rag. As I looked at the remains of this friendly private, the boyish face that hadn't been altered even in death, I regretted the times I'd helped get him drunk.

Finding out that Johnny enjoyed singing old ballads, badly off-key, when he was honed and capped was too much temptation. I thought that was as funny as every-one else did.

"Sorry, kid," I muttered to his corpse, relieved that at least he'd received the gift of a clean death. He hadn't been reworked. Now it was Johnny's turn to provide Fly Taggart with a piece of serious artillery. He was lying on top of a Sig-Cow with a fifty-round magazine. Thanks to him, I might still be a naked savage, but I was back in the game. I was a Marine once more.

As I examined my surroundings, I had the feeling I'd been dropped into a giant warehouse. There were huge boxes, or crates, all over the place with UAC stenciled on them. I began to explore and noticed a red, glowing square that emitted a curious heat. I avoided it for the moment, welcome though the heat would be.

Having gotten in the habit of following Arlene's ar-rows, I started hunting. And looking for more weapons, as well as food, water, and an unbroken radio. I was so intent on all this that I barely noticed it when I turned a corner and was back in zombie country.

I shouldered the rifle and fired while they wasted time roaring. The shot was good; the nearest head exploded like a ripe melon. That startled me; it was a single bullet, not a grenade! This zombie had to be especially ripe.

The next one reacted more typically; the bullet made a normal hole and the creature fell to the floor, twitching. But I was already pounding a round into the head of number three, scutting sideways, firing two or three shots at a time. I lost count of how many zombies went down. A few had weapons, but none had taken a shot at me yet.

It was all too easy; then something on the other side returned fire—actual fire. The damned, brown spinys were back, complete with their bizarre ability to toss flaming snotballs like warm-up pitchers for the devil.

The easy zombie pickin's had made me careless. The first fireball was too close, far too close, to my face and neck. The stuff stuck to my skin like napalm, burning like hell and reminding me that I had no protection over any part of my skin or vulnerable parts.

But I was pumped. With a roar to match a hell-prince, I charged the nearest spiny and let my bayonet do the talking. The blade split thick neck like a cantaloupe, and the demon dropped, bleeding a deep, ruby red.

But even with a bayonet stuck in its windpipe and blood pumping out in buckets, it stretched a clawed hand up toward me. With a thrust and a yank, I tore the neck so badly that the head was hanging lopsided. It would take a lot more work than that to actually decapitate the mother, but at least it wouldn't bother me anymore. I needed the bayonet back. I had other fields to plow.

A number of zombies had gathered around as I was busy taking care of the demon that I hoped had been the one who burned my face. More spinys loitered by the weirdest piece of wall I'd seen yet, with human skulls stuck all over it like raisins in a cake.

A thin female zombie went first, a fat male second, an ex-PFC third. I used the bayonet on all of them because there wasn't room to shoot.

Pivoting, slashing and stabbing, shouting gleeful curses—this was the way to kill! The feel, the smell, the blood pouring out of them beating through my veins, all linked. A world of blood. Some had to be mine; but this was no time to worry over details.

Then there was one zombie left. I recognized its face. Recognition slowed me down . . . this was a good face, honest and stern, like the men who'd settled the frontier.

Corporal Ryan. Dead eyes in a face I once respected were an invitation to do more than kill. I had to erase him from the universe.

I pinned him with the bayonet; but he was made of stern stuff, even as a zombie. Squirming forward, he clawed my face with long, dirty nails. Damned rifle was stuck in him! He was far stronger than the others, stronger than me.

Thank God I knew Ryan better than his reanimated corpse did. The corporal always carried a 10mm pistol in a back-draw holster. I reached behind him. The gun was there! I drew the piece, stuck the business end in Ryan's mouth, and squeezed the trigger.

His death grip combined with the pool of blood underfoot pulled me to the floor. It was too slippery to get up easily. While I freed myself, I tried real hard to assimilate the latest data. If zombies were holding a weapon when they died, they still used it. But the intelligence required to remember a hidden weapon was beyond their reach.

Slipping and sliding on the blood was distracting . . . and then I realized that I was sobbing. Having given myself strict orders to keep emotions under control, I felt betrayed. At least I held onto the pistol.

Standing up, I realized with disgust that the real reason I was weeping was because I had temporarily run out of enemy. All the zombies were dead-dead, and the monsters who had been watching over by the wall of skulls had run off. This was worse than being interrupted in the middle of making love. I really felt that. I had good reason to be crying like a baby.

"Pull yourself together," I ordered Yours Truly. "I mean it. Cut the crap, right now!" I wasn't going to put up with any insubordination.

"Damn you all!" I screamed at the universe. "How long am I supposed to take this, over and over?" It was a good question, but nobody had any answers. I kicked a zombie's head, angry that he wasn't contributing his part to the conversation.

Zombies weren't the only inanimate objects around; I found a metal cabinet that I tore off and flung at a console. Great sound effect. I would have moved on in search of glass to break—an even better sound—but I noticed my little tantrum had actually led to

something useful. As the forest fire raging in my brain toned down to a mild fever-delirium, I vowed never to say anything bad about dumb luck again.

A hidden drawer in the console sprang open. I investigated, hoping to find a weapon. Instead, I found another of those computer key cards, the very same cards I had sworn not to use again while I had my trusty rockets . . . the very same rockets I no longer had. Buck Rogers, back to square one. I picked up the translucent, blue computer disk. Waste not, want not.

A rifle in one hand, pistol in the other, and a key card clenched in my teeth. Not having pockets was becoming a major pain in the butt.

Why didn't I simply field-strip a corpse? I don't know;

I guess my brain wasn't rolling on all tank treads.

One direction seemed as good or bad as any other, so I went back the way I had come. As the frenzy of the battle wore off, I was starting to feel cold again. The red platform was appealing as the only source of heat I knew about around here, the next best thing to a roaring fireplace. It felt great as the heat warmed my cold, naked skin.

Then, as idiots have asked themselves throughout history, I asked the magic words "Why not?"—and rubbed my hands over the thing.

A million flashbulbs exploded in my face.

By the time I finished blinking the world back into focus, I realized I was not in the room I just had been.

My mouth dropped open. Fly, you gorm, I thought, I think you've just discovered your first teleporter!

That square, red platform just had to be the "teleport" pads I had heard about when they posted Fox Company to Mars. They were just big enough for a man to stand on ... assuming he felt adventurous.

I was dubious about the whole thing from day one, and so was Gunny Goforth. If I were surrounded by trolls and out of ammo, I'd decided, I might try one; nothing short of that would tempt me.

The teleport pads were already there when humans first arrived, presumably built the same time as the Gates and gravity generators. Practical folk that we are, we incorporated them into the design of the base; UAC used them to transport heavy ingots

and equipment. I don't think many people used them; most of us worried about things like souls and continuity of consciousness and all that crap.

Trust Corporal Fly Taggart to render the whole philosophical discussion moot by tripping over his own feet into it!

As I stared stupidly at my new surroundings, a swarm of zombies poured around the corner. As the first one fired a round that took me in the shoulder, several thoughts whizzed through my mind. First, as I fell to the floor, I thought of writing up the careless dolt who'd triggered a teleporter by sticking his paws where they weren't supposed to be. The second thought, as I rolled onto my back, was more ironic: moments before, I'd been unhappy over running out of zombies. My third thought, as I sat up, stunned, was: I'm shot!

My Sig-Cow was out of reach. I'd let go of it, along with the key card. I opened fire with the 10mm.

A nearby stone platform provided me cover; the zombies were too stupid to do the same. They reminded me of Army privates.

Taking my time about it, I aimed and fired, aimed and fired. The bullets went in, the blood came out. I took them one by one, killing the very last at point-blank range.

This time I wasn't sorry I'd run out of zombies. The bullet in my shoulder made me groggy. There was nothing I'd rather do at that moment than lie down in a nice, warm pool of blood and sleep forever.

Nothing suicidal; sleep was good. Rest was a sacrament.

Willing my reluctant body to move, I got up.

-16

By now I must have looked like a zombie myself, I felt like one. Being honest about it, I had to admit that I didn't know how a human being crossed over into the zombie state. I hadn't seen the process. The talkative monster implied that he could control zombies, but he never said a word about how they were made—he simply lied about not reworking me if I surrendered.

I wondered . . . was this how the others became what they were, righting a never-ending war that finally drove them mad? Wasn't a sign of insanity the conviction that everyone

and everything is the enemy? That was the way I'd been living since I left the cafeteria and the two Rons and began my assault on Phobos Base and . . . and wherever the hell I was now.

Turning a corner, I was greeted by a sight not calcu-lated to reassure a man doubting his sanity. A gigantic skull, half the length of a full-grown man, glared at me through empty sockets. It seemed to be made of brass. I stared into its eyeless sockets before allowing my gaze to lower. The giant, metal skull had a tongue; a curving, snaky, metal tongue.

There was no way this was standard-issue in a UAC refinery!

Of course, the skull's tongue had to be a lever.

"I can't help it," I said, "I'm a born lever-puller."

If I were already dead and in hell, it hardly mattered what would happen if I pulled the lever. I still had my curiosity. And if I were still alive, trying to save humani-ty from an alien invasion, then I had even more curiosity.

I pulled the lever. It was ice cold against my already chilled flesh. A metallic, grinding noise riveted my attention. It sounded like all the old, abandoned automobile plants in Detroit had started up at once. And with all that sound, one stupid box rose from the ground containing another pair of skull-tongue switches! I pulled the next one in line and heard a click from the wall directly in front of me.

Moving to investigate, I saw a crack of light in the wall, then another and another until the yellow lines had formed a perfect square. Secret doors were losing their appeal for me. If this one were going to improve my opinion, then it had better offer something better than the usual collection of monsters. I shoved open the door with one mighty heave.

A bloody, naked figure held a gun pointed directly at my face. By reflex, I shoved my own piece right between its eyes.

"DROP THE GUN!"

"DROP THE FREAKIN' GUN!"

"PUT IT DOWN, I SWEAR TO GOD I'LL BLOW

YOUR FOOL HEAD—"

"—WHERE I CAN SEE THEM, PUT YOUR

HANDS UP—”

“—AND DON’T MOVE OR—”

“—GROUND! ON THE GROUND, MOVE!”

Her eyes. Her eyes were alive. And she spoke . . . words. By now we both stood, each pistol pressed against the other’s face, eyes wide with fear, wonder, and hope—

Was it? Could it be? Could she be?—shouting at the top of our voices in pain, rage, and desperate need.

My hammer was cocked, but my finger outside the trigger guard; I had just begun to suspect, just begun . . .

Something clicked in my brain. The penny dropped. I recognized the bloody, disheveled, pallid creature.

A dream come true—if true—in a world that specialized in nightmares. Panting before my face, watching warily, ready to fire off half the magazine if necessary, stood the reason I had come this far and hadn’t yet given up.

I wanted to say her name, but I couldn’t. We were each locked in a perimeter of silence, holding a gun against each other’s face, doubts and paranoia having the only voice. One of us would have to say something.

She went first. “Drop the friggin’ gun!” The command came from a lifetime of giving not an inch or trusting without two forms of picture ID ... and that had been back on Earth! She’d worked hard, her every friendship based on a sense of honor. She’d kicked her way onto the Mars mission. And this is what she’d found.

But she’d survived. And I’d survived. She’d kept me alive with every A.S. and arrow; and maybe her fantasy that I’d come after her kept her alive—why else use our private code, a link between just the two of us?

But now there was no room for sentiment, only for certainty.

“You are a dead man if you do not drop the freaking gun now.”

Oops. My arm and hand had been through too much to even consider it. My body was wired for instant responses. The same as her body if she were still the old Arlene. The only reason I hadn’t blown her away automatically was the time spent praying she was alive, and a willingness to take a risk right now that she wasn’t really a zombie. No

zombie had ever spoken before. And somehow, covered with mud and gore, she looked too damned bad to be a zombie. Only the living could look that fried!

“Arlene, your ass is mine,” I replied. “I’ve had the drop on you since I opened the damned door.”

Zombies didn’t talk that way, either. They didn’t tease or smile a moment later when awareness crept across a human face. She returned that smile, and I knew every-thing would be all right.

“Your finger wasn’t even on the trigger, big guy. I’d have blown you away before you fumbled around and found it.” She was wounded, disheveled, filthy, terrified, naked . . . and totally, totally alive.

“You’re alive!” I shouted.

“No, really?” she shouted back.

We slowly lowered our weapons simultaneously, mirror images of each other. Grinning.

Staring me up and down, she commented, “Nice fashion statement.” I’d forgotten I was buck naked. My damned reflexes insisted on embarrassing me, and I reflexively covered myself.

Well, I guess it was one more proof I was still fully human. I doubt that zombies are modest. “Turn your back, for Christ’s sake,” I implored.

“I will not” she answered, eyes roving where they shouldn’t. “You’re the first decent thing I’ve seen since this creep show began.”

If we kept this up, maybe things would get so bloody normal that the monsters would simply pack their suit-cases and leave.

Arlene could dish out a hard time when she wanted. I decided to get dressed, and finally I noticed the corpses and stripped one. She reached out a hand. “No, Fly; don’t put those on yet. Please?”

My right foot was halfway into a boot far too small to fit. It stretched, conforming to the size of my foot: one size truly fits all. Arlene turned as red as the crimson wall. “Jesus, I’m sorry, Fly. You’re my buddy; I shouldn’t have made you uncomfortable. Forgive me?”

I finished dressing. It didn’t take long. Now it was my turn to look her over, which I did

with a lot more subtlety than she did with me. I kept my eyes moving where she'd let hers stop in embarrassing places. God, she looked good. All the dirt and blood almost gave her the appearance of being dressed in a weirdly hip-punk outfit. Her slender waist, tight, firm thighs, medium bust, and long arms made me think of more than the undeniable fact that she had the body of the ideal orbital pilot—her ultimate goal when she'd earned enough in service to take a hiatus, get a degree, and take a commission. Space travel needed the occasional boost in morale.

She finally got the idea. There were plenty of corpses around with uniforms waiting to be stripped. I watched her from the corner of my eye as she followed my example. The best aspect of these form-fitting uniforms was the way they conformed to every contour of the human body. She looked just as good in clothes.

I tried to think of something appropriate to say, then grunted, punching her shoulder middling hard. "Now I forgive you," I said with a grin. The grin didn't last long. I'd completely forgotten about the bullet wound in my shoulder. The pain finally caught up with me as the adrenaline wore off.

"Jeez, that looks bad," she said. "Maybe there's some Medikits around here. You mind holding still while I do some alterations on your shoulder? Meanwhile, tell me where the hell you came from."

Seemed like a fair deal to me. "Long as you tell me what happened to you, A.S. You and the company. And what the hell were you doing hiding in a cupboard?"

She made me go first. I recapped everything that had happened since I left Ron and Ron behind in the mess hall. She'd been through the same crap; I didn't need to be overly detailed about the killing. It would be nothing more than a sentence completion exercise.

While I told her my adventures, hoping I wasn't boring her, we weren't standing still. With the soft suction sounds of our boots on the cold, stone floor, we went hunting for medical supplies. "I'd rather go up against a dozen zombies than one of these monster aliens," I was telling Arlene as she yanked open a closet door.

Dozens of shotguns cascaded down on us like bales of hay . . . heavy, painful bales of hale. Fortunately, they weren't loaded.

Staring at the pile of weapons for a long moment, I put on my best annoyed face and asked Arlene: "Can't you keep your space neat and tidy?"

Rolling her eyes, she scooped up one of the weapons and tossed it to me. She took one, too. I regretted leaving behind such a beautiful pile of weaponry. But Arlene and I only had four hands between us. We still needed a Medikit, and Arlene was starving. With the

burning sensation growing in my arm, the Medikit was first on the list.

Then I was going to get my Recon Babe out of this hellhole. I'd e-mail her, if that's what it took to pack her back to Mars. No, Earth.

"Get your crap together," I said, "and take mental notes."

"Notes?"

"We've got to give a full report when we get back.

We're blowing this popcorn stand."

Arlene smiled wanly. "You have any good ideas on that one, Ace?"

"I left a land-cart back at the entrance; we can hot-rod it back to the air base and take the troopship back to Mars. Or even Earth ... it should be able to make it."

Arlene looked around, studying the architecture.

The architect must have been hired by the Addams

Family. Nothing seemed normal. The surface of the walls was rough, twisted, the sickening color of internal organs. Skulls, monster faces, and decay dominated everywhere I chanced to glance.

Arlene coughed politely. "Just two problems with that plan. First, we're not on Phobos anymore, Toto."

"Huh?"

"We're on Deimos, and there ain't no land-carts, or rockets, either. We used all the ships to bug our people out four years ago. Fly, we're stuck here, and we don't even know where 'here' is!"

I must have looked blank; she continued. "Look, Fly, don't you remember when Deimos vanished from the screens?"

"No, actually. What the hell are you talking about?"

"Whoops. I guess you were already in custody when we got word from Boyd that Deimos had disappeared from the Martian sky."

The idea that a moon could vanish bothered me for some reason. “Wouldn’t there have been gravitational effects?” I asked.

She laughed before asking, “Are you kidding? Do you know how small Deimos is? It’s even smaller than Phobos.”

“I knew that.” These chunks of space rock were so small that their real gravity was theoretical, notwithstanding the alien gravity zones. Although I’d become used to fantastic events lately, a little nugget of skepticism scratched at my capacity to believe just anything. “How do you know we’re on Deimos?”

“ ‘Cause I’ve been here, Fly. I did a TDS as a yeoman right here while I was waiting for an opening in the Light Drop.”

“A yeoman! But the Marines don’t have any staff positions, only line positions.”

“On loan to the Navy. Technically, I was still a rifleman, but the only weapon they issued me was a word processor.”

I had to think about this. The implications were definitely bad. And the image of Arlene Sanders as a secretary was astonishing.

I looked up. There was a skylight in the ceiling, and where Mars should have been, there was nothing. Where stars should have been, there were no stars. The black of space was missing, too. All I saw was a gray mist, not to be confused with clouds; the texture was all wrong.

Having a gift for the obvious, I said, “We’re not in orbit around Mars, are we?”

She smiled and patted me on the head. “Congrats, Fly. You win the Nobel Prize. You don’t see a pressure dome up there, do you? But we’re still sucking air. I know we’re on Deimos; I recognize all the stuff that H. P. Lovecraft didn’t redecorate.”

Who, I wanted to know, was H. P. Lovecraft? If he’d had anything to do with this, I wanted to punch his lights out.

“No, Fly,” Arlene said. “He was a fantasy writer, early twentieth century American. Obsessed with hybrid mon-sters and underground labyrinths. Always describing ancient menaces as eldritch.”

I’d never heard the word before, but it sounded just right. “This situation has got eldritch coming out the ass.”

“You can say that again,” she agreed. “And this is Deimos, muchacho; only thing is, these bastards have taken it somewhere.”

“Great. So what’s number two?”

She looked puzzled for a moment, then she frowned.

“I don’t want to hurt you, Fly.”

I licked my lips, feeling my stomach contract. I never liked anything from a girl that began like that. “What?”

“You’ve always been more loyal to the Corps than I was, my friend.”

I stiffened. “What’s wrong with the Corps? The Marines have given me a lot, babe, in case you’ve forgotten.”

She smiled and shook her head. Arlene hadn’t forgot-ten my father, a pathological liar and petty thief who ended up doing twenty-five to life for his fourth felony conviction . . . trying to run down a state trooper with his pickup truck. He died in Vacaville two years later, from a cerebral hemorrhage, they said.

My father was the pettiest, lowest, meanest man I ever knew. He couldn’t even understand the word “honor.” He never knew why I joined the Corps, never would have understood if I told him I did it for him ... so I would never be him.

All right, I confess. Father, forgive me, for I have sinned. The Corps was the world to me.

“There’s nothing wrong with the United States Marine Corps, Fly. But damn you, there’s something a bit more important.”

“Like what?”

“Like the human freakin’ race!”

She had me cold. So I got pissed. “Hang the human race! ‘It’s Tommy-this, an’ Tommy-that—‘”

“Oh, don’t quote Kipling at me; I’m the one who gave you the book. Fly, what do you think the whole purpose of the Corps is?”

I didn’t say anything. I didn’t like where this was leading; I knew what she was going to

say. But I couldn't figure where she was wrong.

"You're so much into honor and duty, Fly. Don't you know what duty means? We're the ones on the wall, kiddo. They might not know we're there; might not even know there is a wall, might not give a hang. But that's what we're here for.

"Fly, this thing is bigger than just getting us both out alive. We're the only ones here, only ones who know about the invasion . . . the only ones who might be able to throw something big and heavy into the gears. And damn it to hell, I'm not going to bug out until I do it!"

I glared at Arlene. I wanted to protect her, get her out of there. I was a man, she was my —

Bull. I was a Marine. And so was Arlene. I understood what she meant about the wall; somebody had to man it. Who else?

I lowered my gaze. We couldn't just bug out, even if we could find a transport on abandoned Deimos. We had to get to the bottom of all this—and if Deimos was like Phobos, I had a bad feeling that meant getting to the bottom of the Deimos facility. For some weird reason, the alien monster demons preferred "down."

Besides, her point number one still made sense, too. We don't even know where "here" is. Deimos had been yanked away somewhere ... we were stuck, no rocket, no clue where we might be ... only that we weren't in orbit around Mars anymore. "Up" meant —what? Empty space? Nothingness? The only way out—if there was one—was "down," following the levels of Deimos to the bottom.

I glared up at her again; her eyes were as cold as steel, as warm as the sacred heart. "Well don't expect me to say I'm sorry," I muttered.

-17

While we'd been talking, we came across an undamaged crate that looked promising. All that stood between us and it was one of my fireball-throwing buddies.

This one never got a chance to warm up. Arlene whirled and blasted him; the demon went down without a chance to hock and spit.

The label on the crate promised Medikits and com-rats. We opened it and found a full pantry.

Arlene insisted on playing nurse before I played chef. She examined my shoulder; the bullet had gone straight through. Score one for my side. She injected universal antiviral/antibiotic and wrapped a bandage around my shoulder, while I gritted my teeth and groaned like a big baby.

When she finished with my arm, I heaved a sigh of relief. God, I hate medical crap! But I was premature; I'd forgotten about my burns.

Arlene didn't forget. The cream she applied on my forehead, cheeks, and chin hurt worse than the arm injections! It hurt so bad that I started hunting for any serious cuts or burns Arlene might have . . . something that would require my delicate attention—and lots of cream. Despite her appearance, she was disgustingly healthy.

Now it was her turn to tell a story. "Fly," she began, pausing to gulp water from a bottle we'd extracted from the crate, "I don't want to see anything like that first assault ever again."

She sat with her back to a wall, and I stood where I had a good view of anything coming or going. I had to find out what happened to Fox Company. Munching on a bland, fast-energy bar that tasted as fine as a steak at that moment, I gave her my undivided attention (and a chocolate bar of her own).

The situation had been as bad as I imagined. The assault simply fell apart. Seeing the zombies was enough —the guys didn't even need flaming-snot demons to drive them off the deep end. Walking, staring, drooling, rotting human corpses proved sufficient to make them forget every combat lesson they'd ever learned.

They went crazy; they broke ranks and charged the zombies. Fox was full of fighting spirit, all right; it just Sacked a plan, strategy and tactics, a command structure, and a snowball's chance in they-should-have-known-where as soon as they let themselves get isolated, cut off from each other. The fire-hocking spinys picked them off one at a time.

I couldn't really blame my buds. I'd had the same reaction, the same rage to rip the zombies apart with my bare hands.

Arlene was saved because she wasn't as affected by the male berserker fury. It must be a male thing; testosterone, maybe? Jesus, did that sour-lemon odor actually stimulate a testosterone and adrenal rush overdose?

Then again, she might simply have had better self-control than a guy. I interrupted to say, "You're a better man than I am, Arlene."

"Shush, Fly, if you want to hear the rest of this." I shushed.

“I found a cupboard and hid out,” she continued. “I could hear them moving just beyond the door. Some-times hearing is worse than seeing.”

I nodded at the truth of that observation. “Like this ugly demon,” I said, kicking the brown hide of the creature she’d dispatched. “They hiss like giant serpents. Scares the piss out of you in the dark.”

She laughed. “I wouldn’t call that a demon! I’ve seen some others that more deserve the name.”

“Yeah,” I agreed, remembering the minotaurs. “I guess those hell-princes you warned me about with your skull and crossbones are a more traditional demon design.”

“I wouldn’t know,” she said. “I never saw them.

You’re talking about the pentagram room?”

“You didn’t see them?”

“I put one foot into that room and heard one of ‘em scream. I guess it saw me, but I didn’t stick around to see it! What do they look like?”

“Eight feet tall, bright, flaming red, with goat legs and huge horns. They fire some sort of electrical-ball lightning from wrist-launchers.”

She shook her head. “Nasty. But the thing I call a demon is a huge, bloated, pink thing with tusks. Maybe we should call it a pinkie?”

“Does your pink demon make a pig sound?”

The way she shuddered answered the question before she nodded. She wasn’t kidding about what you hear being worse than what you see. I didn’t press her for further details. I had a sinking feeling that no description was necessary. Before this was over, I imagined we’d be seeing lots worse nightmares, a full menagerie from the lowest pits of hell.

“So what happened after you left me the warning?”

She smiled, happy to oblige. “I ran like the devil.” She interrupted herself, uncomfortable with the expression. The way things were going, there was no telling who we might meet next. “I ran,” she said, “and found the crack. I had enough paint stick left for a final warning. I want you to know, Fly Taggart, that taking the time for that Do Not Enter sign was the stupidest thing I did all day; while I was making like a public

information booth, one of those hell-princes, as you call them, came tromping down the hall."

"You've got guts," I piped in, and didn't care if she shushed me this time. Instead, she insisted on my going back into the narrative and giving all the gory details of how close I'd come to cashing in when facing these monsters.

Then she resumed: "While I was writing as fast as I could, I studied that crack in the wall, wishing I could make it larger."

"I couldn't squeeze through."

"I know. I felt like dog dirt. But what could I do? I didn't have a jaws with me, and no time to crank the crack wider even if I did have. I wormed my way through, leaving a few layers of skin behind, and hoofed it for the Gate."

She stopped to catch her breath.

"You must have been surprised when you came through stripped bare," I said.

She sighed. "I was surprised to still be alive, which is how I've felt every leg of this mission. There was a corpse-reception committee waiting at the other end; but at least they weren't zombies. While I picked my way through all those bodies, a metric ton of zombies started teleporting in. There were too many of them to handle—so I dived into that secret cupboard you found . . . and somebody pressed a switch, and the freaking door slammed shut! And then you showed up, looking. . . "

—she struggled for words—"not a helluva lot better than the zombies, Fly."

"Thanks," I said. She always had a knack for compliments.

Sometimes I suspected she liked toying with me. I pointed at the brown carcass of a spiny. "So if you don't want me calling it a demon," I said, "how about a spiny?"

"How about an imp?"

"An imp?"

"Why not? I had a book of fairy tales when I was a kid with goblins and things. The picture closest to this critter had the caption 'imp.' It was playing with magical fire."

Our game was becoming fun. We didn't have a lot of entertainment at the moment. "I dunno," I said. "Some-thing about the head reminds me of an old monster movie about a

fish-guy who lived in a lagoon."

"He's an imp," she insisted, reminding me that tough Marine or not, she was still a woman.

My mother didn't raise any fools. "He's an imp," I agreed.

"We should name the others, too," she said, encouraged. "We've got zombies, imps, demons or pinkies, and hell-princes. What do we call the rest?"

I laughed. "That's pretty biblical, isn't it?"

She stared blankly. Not everyone had enjoyed the benefits of religious schooling. "Anyway, it's a great idea, Arlene. If we ever find a functional radio, we'll need to report to someone. We might as well play Adam and Eve and name all the beasts."

She relaxed, convinced now that I wasn't making fun of her, so I continued. "One of these imps talked to me—" I started, but Arlene cut me off.

"Talked?" This was the most surprised I'd seen her yet.

We hadn't exactly duplicated each other's adventures.

"He tried to get me to surrender, promising if I did, I wouldn't be reworked—uh, zombiefied. But the son of a bitch was such a liar, I wouldn't trust him for the time with a clock stuck to his face."

The way she laughed made me laugh. Finding her had changed everything. I wanted to live now as well as fight, report back to Mars or to Earth, do my duty for the survival of homo sap, the home team.

"Are those all the monsters we've discovered so far?" she asked.

"No," I admitted. "There's something around here that's partly invisible. I was thinking of them as killer ghosts."

"Specters," she corrected offhand. If we got out of this alive, I would recommend Arlene for the job of an editor. On a religious magazine. I had a sense of justice. "I haven't run into them yet," she added.

"And some flying skulls. What should we call those?"

"Flying skulls."

“Right. What do you want to call them?”

“Flying skulls, you lamebrain! Call ‘em as you see ‘em.”

I found out she hadn’t run into any of the mysterious blue spheres, either, so far the only good thing to come out of the Gate. I had the feeling that before this was over, there would be much more of the naming of names.

Now it was back to business. Lunchtime was over.

It was a brief rest; we needed real sleep. We needed to find somewhere secure so that we could take turns sleeping and watch-standing. And we needed real food.

“Something feels weird about this place,” she said. Something about Deimos was creepier than Phobos. The place was colder, but that wasn’t it. The odors were about the same, but a bad taste seemed to go with it. Maybe we were closer to the source of the sour-lemon stench that hung around the zombies. Whatever it was, a cloying odor underrode everything, something very slowly rot-ting.

“I hate looking at it,” I answered her. If lesser demons were in charge of the other Martian moon, then Old Nick himself had drawn the blueprint here. The skulls were starting to get on my nerves. They were everywhere, all different sizes and shapes, always more evil than a normal human skull.

As we explored. the color we noticed most Was red. darkening into the shade of rare steak. The little voice wanted to know why it wasn’t getting hotter. Red was hot. Hell was supposed to be hot.

The floor became moist with the hated ooze, not yet deep enough to require slogging through a river of the stuff. I wondered if Arlene and I were exploring the great intestine of something so gigantic that I was going to have a hard time ripping out its guts.

It seemed like the deeper we went into hell, the closer we got to the life force. Screw that. The Martian moons were more appealing as desolate rocks exposed to the cold of space.

“Bad news,” said Arlene, pointing at a teleport plat-form at the end of a corridor. We had no choice: use it or go back. Along with all the normal maps I wanted, I now wished for a map showing where all these grids connected up. How many shopping days before Christmas?

“Somebody’s got to do it, Arlene.”

“Do what?”

“Recon these teleport things.”

She placed a firm hand on my shoulder. “Nice of you to volunteer, Corporal. Rank before beauty.”

“Pearls before swine. I was about to delegate, PFC!” I looked around. “The layout’s different here than on Phobos.”

Looking back, I observed the vista of emptiness we had walked through to get to this point. I had the feeling that the walls were squirming when I didn’t look at them.

“More dead ends. I don’t like jumping into a fire when I’m getting fat and happy in the frying pan. But we’re humanity’s vanguard, right?” It sounded sarcastic, but I didn’t mean it to be. “We’ve got to find out what’s happened and communicate with someone up the chain.”

Whenever Arlene smiled, it felt warmer, nicer, than when we’d just been palling around. War brings out something good in a certain kind of person. I didn’t know about me, but I was sure about Arlene.

“Besides,” she elaborated, “best way to stay alive is to be on the offense. I’m coming right behind you.” There was no one I’d rather have backing me up.

“Give me thirty seconds.” They wouldn’t be my famous last words, I hoped.

The teleporter sensation, now that I was ready for it, was similar to the Gate, but quicker, less disorienting. My clothes stayed on and the weapons didn’t disappear. I was ready to secure the beachhead.

I’d arrived on a platform virtually identical to the one at point of departure. I should have jumped off right away, but I was distracted by the sound of heavy pile drivers, coming closer and closer. Jesus and Mary, I realized, they’re footsteps!

-18

Abruptly, I remembered where I stood. I leapt off the platform just in time; Arlene had counted the full thirty seconds before following.

“Clear?” she asked as she sparkled into view.

“No,” I answered. “Listen to that.” Light as a cat, she pounced down beside me. The thudding sound wasn’t getting any softer.

“Poke your head around the corner,” she suggested. “I have a pretty good idea what’s making all that racket.”

We took our time approaching the corner. Arlene gestured that she would go first. I don’t argue with a lady. When she glanced back at me, her face was stern.

“You’ve been wondering what I call a demon,” she said.

“So take a good look.”

I did. And as Gunny Goforth might have said, she wasn’t just a-whistlin’ Dixie.

A whole box of demons marched around atop a two-story platform that looked as though it might lower any moment. One of the “pinkies” started making those pig sounds I found so disgusting. But as I paid close attention to the anatomical details of this thing, I decided the Porker Anti-Defamation League might disagree with my description.

These monsters were the most massively concentrated collections of muscle power in the whole zoo. They were about six feet tall, with mouths that looked like they could swallow Cleveland .. . and probably had. They were demons, all right. She had me there. So long as these guys were wandering the corridors, nothing else deserved the name. Their flesh was a dark pink; Arlene’s nickname for them was accurate.

They didn’t see us yet; but it didn’t look as if we’d be going anywhere if we didn’t deal with them. There were no other doors; eventually, that platform would have to lower so we could ride it up.

They stamped around on short, stubby legs, like shaved gorillas with horns and saw teeth. “Do they have any projectiles?” I asked Arlene.

“What do you mean?”

“Fireballs, lightning, anything like that?”

“They don’t throw anything at you.” She noticed my body relax a little. “Don’t let it fool you,” she warned.

“They’re deadly if you get anywhere near them.”

“Can we pop them from down here?” I asked.

“Not likely. You need concentrated force, like a .458

Weatherby or a twelve-gauge at ten feet. I saw an imp go after a demon, and the pinkie took three fireballs in the face and swallowed the imp whole! It burped out the bloody spines.”

Data point: imps and demons, like imps and zombies, don’t get along.

“Fly. if we’re going to progress, we’ve got to lower that platform. There’s no other way to kill them with what we’ve got.”

I noticed I’d been leaning against something hard and metallic. It was another skull switch, just begging to be flicked. I started reaching for it but Arlene butted my hand away with her shotgun. That hurt.

“You don’t know what that’s going to do,” she pro-tested.

“I can’t help it... I’m a born lever-puller.” I flicked the tongue. With a loud groan, the platform lowered like an elevator. The demons wandered off. They snuffled their pig snouts and evidently scented us, for they made a beeline.

As they came for us, we scutted back around the corner. The demons didn’t seem able to run, but they could power-walk with that thud-thud-thud pounding through our skulls.

Arlene and I both had shotguns and a serious attitude problem toward demons. I found their open mouths an irresistible target. The first one ate my powder, and the back of its head opened up like a watermelon. There is always something to say for close range. Arlene took hers out with a well-placed blast to the chest.

If we were acting like a team with our backs to the wall, the pinkies were dying as individuals, marching forward two abreast to receive their quota of shotgun death. The corpses piled up, providing sufficient time for us to reload and do it again.

As an added bonus, none of the monsters made that snuffling pig sound. They were too busy roaring as they died. The roaring was loud, but it was the mark of their defeat. I started feeling good about my bloody work.

“Like shooting drunks in a barrel,” I said to Arlene.

“Don’t get cocky!”

She was right. Hubris.

The ranks of the enemy finally diminished. We'd stumbled into a finite number and we were using up our demons fast. .. about as fast as our shotgun shells.

"Don't discount them," Arlene warned me. I wasn't about to discount her experiences. "So long as you can keep them at a safe distance, this is all right. But I saw what happened when a buddy got his arm bitten off; and then it ate his head. He avoided being a zombie, only to wind up as demon food."

Good things come to an end, even in a paradise like Deimos. A bullet came very close to ending the career of Yours Truly. This tipped me off that someone was shooting at me.

"Look out!" I shouted at Arlene; but she was already down, crouching behind the wall of demon bodies.

During the precious seconds I spent saving myself from whoever was playing sniper, the last demon charged like a runaway bulldozer. I turned to find myself staring into a meter-wide maw.

I thought I knew what a bad smell was before that moment. A square mile of human cesspool might come close. The odor was so bad it was like a weapon. My eyes watered so I could hardly see.

Arlene shouted something, but I couldn't make out her words. She was busy with problems of her own; the sniper was still at it.

One of those bullets, clearly meant for Arlene or me, connected with the back of the demon. It had the same reaction as a human being would have ... if stung by a mosquito. While it tried to scratch at its back (and I wondered how it could accomplish such a task without ripping itself to ribbons), I swung the shotgun back into action. The target came forward, and the bore of my weapon literally went down its gaping maw. I pulled the trigger.

My eyes filled with stinking monster blood; not a desirable state of affairs when trying to avoid the persistent rifleman. I could hear Arlene, though, shouting, "That's the last of them," as her shotgun finished speaking for her. She had to be speaking about the demons. I could still hear the ping-ping of rifle fire over my head. But it was a relief to know that no pinkish mouths would chew my tender epidermis.

Arlene crawled over to me and started rubbing the blood out of my eyes. I could manage that on my own. I just hadn't gotten around to it. "Spread out," I ordered, "don't make one target!"

She didn't argue with my superior combat experience. She rolled away without a word

while I finished clearing my vision. Whoever was trying to shoot us had taken a break, probably just to reload. I was certain it wouldn't last; he had the high ground, beyond where the platform had been. We needed to alter the situation in our favor immediately.

"Platform!" I shouted, then charged the lowered lift. It had its own switch, which I flipped. The lift started up, and Arlene finally realized what was happening. She ran and leapt, barely catching the edge. I pulled her up; we crouched back-to-back and took a little trip.

On the next level, we rounded a corner and came face-to-, well, you couldn't call it a face really—we ran right into another demon. I didn't know about Arlene, but I found the situation very annoying. We'd just been through all that. We were so close that, as it charged, I fell back on my butt and fired a round between his legs. This staggered the demon, and Arlene finished the job, plugging it head-on and killing it good and proper.

Now we could return to the more traditional task of trying to find out who was shooting at us.

Past the platform we saw two doors. Exchanging glances, we approached. One had a blue border and the other had a red border. Of course, they were both locked. I missed my rockets.

I extracted my blue key card and inserted it into the proper slot, swiping it across the mag reader.

The door opened with a clean, whistling, hydraulic sound. At the other end was a teleport. Deimos had a "thing" for teleports, all right.

"The lady or the tiger?" asked Arlene.

"What?"

"A story I read once. We've got a red door and a teleport. Which one?"

"Yeah, too bad we don't have a red key."

"Hell, Fly, all you had to do was ask!" She produced a key card and presented it to me. Arlene liked to play when working. "I found it in the secret room while waiting for you to rescue me," she said with a wink.

"I'll pick the lady," I said, and started to insert the red key.

Marine training conies in handy. I heard something on the other side of the door; and

there was nothing wrong with Arlene's ears, either. I swiped the key through the slot, then skipped to the side, scattergun ready. Arlene took the opposite side.

The moment the door opened, she discharged a shell, killing a zombie on the other side. He was holding a shotgun just like ours. He wasn't the sniper. The zombie standing next to him had a Sig-Cow, and I wasted him. We cleared the room, each covering 270 degrees.

The room was really more of a walk-in closet. It was empty of more zombies. But I was already worried about something else: if the one with the rifle had been shooting at us, then had ducked in here, it had all the signs of an ambush. But zombies didn't think! An ambush suggested tactical thinking . . . thinking!

I hadn't yet had an opportunity to confide in Arlene my suspicions of an overall Mind guiding the invasion, using a great number of mindless opponents against a few human survivors to learn our limits.

She probably wasn't in the mood for a quiet, analytical discussion right then. There was too much blood on her, on me.

Now it was the lady's turn to find a switch. The room was flooded with clean, white light. We had found a treasure chamber .. . medical supplies, more corn-rats, and ammunition, lots of it. Best of all was another of those handheld video things.

"Fly, you know what this is?" exclaimed Arlene in excitement. I let her tell me. "It's a computer map of the entire floor plan!"

The medical supplies allowed me to return the "favor" Arlene had done me. She'd been winged by the sniper. She wasn't carrying any bullets around with her, but one had grazed her shoulder. And she had other cuts and bruises from our last battle.

"I'm your doctor now," I said.

Eyeing the self-heating tins of food and coffee, she sized me up through slitted eyes and said, "I'd rather you were the cook."

"Chef," I corrected her. "And what's the difference, anyway?"

"Between a cook and a chef?"

"No, between a doctor and a cook!"

"You win. Feed me, Fly."

I bit my tongue. “Doctoring first.” She didn’t argue, but continued working on the computer map as I tended her wounds. I found a tube of the same cream she’d used on me; but she didn’t grimace. I used the hypo to inject the antiviral; but she never flinched. She really was a better man than I.

We didn’t have any disagreement until I insisted we get some sleep. “You’ve got to be kidding, Fly. I’m not about to close my eyes and lie down in a rotting pile of zombie corpses!”

“We can carry them out and pile them in front of the door.”

“Oh, great—an announcement that we’re in here.”

“All right. I’ll throw them onto the last teleport platform.”

“We’ll throw them.” As simple as that, sweet reason had prevailed.

The job took twenty minutes. We didn’t bother with the teleporter; we spread them like speed bumps among the demons. Maybe visitors would think they had killed each other.

Then we enjoyed our first real meal together. The snack had only kept us going; this was a veritable feast by comparison.

I insisted that she sleep first. She’d been on the go longer than I. While I was still being nursemaided by the Rons, she was at risk, in battle, up to her eyeballs in demon guts. She would sleep first, whatever it took.

Turned out all it took was getting her to put her head down “just for a moment.” I let her sleep for four.

When it was my turn, I went out like a drained tallboy. She woke me with a gentle hand on my shoulder and a beautiful face to appreciate. We’d both been too exhausted for nightmares. We were living them.

I hated to leave that room. The same way I’d felt about the Phobos lab infirmary. No, that was wrong. This room was better than that. I’d shared the time with a woman whose survival turned my universe from empty muck back into gold.

Blinking away pieces of sleep, I slung the Sig-Cow across my back and we returned to the blue door and again faced the teleporter. “Same routine as last time?” I asked.

“Nah. Let’s go together.”

“Why not?”

“What the hell.”

We found ourselves in a room with no doors, no windows, and one of Arlene’s big, pink demons.

“Mine,” I called, and pounded a shell before Arlene could argue.

“I have a feeling there’s plenty to go around,” she said.

I was almost starting to like the pink bastards. Their lack of projectile weaponry made them favorites in my book. Of course, I hadn’t seen them chow-down on a comrade the way Arlene had.

I took point, positively greedy for my next demon kill.

I moved well ahead of Arlene.

Oh, Fly. Hubris, hubris, hubris! Pride goeth before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall.

Turning one of those treacherous corners so common in both Phobos and Deimos, I stepped right into The Wizard of Oz. What else could you call a giant, floating head?

-19

This head wasn’t handsome enough to be a movie star. Its grotesque skin was made of millions of squirming, knotted, blood-red worms stretched over a huge, inflated balloon. For an instant I thought of the floating blue sphere.

Staring into the single red eye of this floating pumpkin with a tube for a mouth, I doubted it would make me feel like a million . . . years old, maybe.

I dived sideways as the pumpkin spit a ball of lightning out the tube mouth, burning my scalp and hair as it sailed past. It exploded against the wall, producing a million slivers of blue-flickering electricity that had every hair on any part of my body standing at attention.

“Mary, Mother of God!” I cried. “Another one that shoots stuff!”

I ran back toward Arlene, shouting, “Run, run, run!” With pain and surprise still fresh, I couldn’t think of anything else to do.

But the floating head hadn’t been in Arlene’s face; she was still in control. The red ball floated around the corner, and she let it have a blast from behind.

It rebounded from the blast, roaring in pain, then slowly turned to face her. While it did, I caught hold of myself.

I blasted the floating pumpkin from my angle. As it turned back to me, Arlene skated to the side and blasted it again.

Now we both knew what to do. We dropped naturally into a standard Light Drop tactic —move, fire, move again, fire again. The ball did a lot of bouncing. Whatever life force kept it going hadn’t left it yet. But we kept firing.

Then it died the messiest monster death I had seen so far. One moment the ball was bouncing against the walls; the next, there came a spray of sticky, blue goo that smelled like caramelized pumpkin pie and sounded like an overripe squash dropped ten stories. I seriously considered losing the lunch I had struggled so hard to ingest.

“Oo-rah!” exulted Arlene. “Smashing pumpkins into small pieces of putrid debris! What the hell was that?”

“Um. I was going to ask you the same question.”

I couldn’t take my eyes off the disgusting, deflated remains. We should have been expecting brand new monsters, but this floating beach-ball thing was so weird, it meant anything was possible.

That scared the hell out of me. It meant we might run into something indestructible, or at least unkillable.

“What, ah, do you want to call this one?” Arlene asked.

I’d forgotten our little game. It was a good question, but my mind was blank. “Call it a pumpkin,” I suggested at last.

Arlene wasn’t impressed. She wrinkled her nose as if smelling limburger cheese. “I didn’t mean that as a serious name, Fly. We need something more. . . frightening.”

“All right, then, you name it.”

“No dice, Fly. First person who sees a monster has to name it. That’s the rule.”

I was about to demand to know why she got to make the rules; I stifled myself in time. Of course she made the rules—she was the female.

“Then it’s a pumpkin, Arlene.” I put my foot down. Maybe I’ll get lucky and she’ll dislike my name enough that the rule will change.

We secured the corridor. It was monster-free. It wasn’t ooze-free, but the stuff didn’t look deep until pretty far along. Ahead lay a small ocean of the stuff with an exit at the other end.

“Best way to get through shallow goo is jogging,” she said. “Eats away your boots, but you last longer.”

“Sure beats swimming in it,” I agreed.

“Don’t be silly. That would kill you.”

I made a mental note to brag to Arlene about my swim.

I searched the immediate vicinity for any life-giving blue spheres, but we were alone in the sea of green. “So what does your computer map say?”

Arlene zoomed the room we were in, and we noticed a couple of switches and a teleporter.

We threw the first switch, and stairs slid into view like shark fins rising from a tranquil sea. We hoofed it to the next switch, then went straight to the teleporter. We did not pass GO, we did not collect 200 monsters.

“My turn to go first,” she declared; I knew better than to argue.

“I’ll count to thirty.”

Her trim form faded from view, and I started the count. “. . . Twenty-eight, twenty-nine, thirty.”

Weapon up, I followed, ready for almost anything—except what I actually saw: a whole bank of shiny, new, undamaged radios! “Bank is open,” said Arlene.

“I guess they missed this room,” I said, checking the corners for possible ambush. There was nowhere to hide, and we seemed to be alone; but I didn’t let down my guard. The

invisible ghosts were reason enough not to completely trust the old eyeballs.

Arlene fired up one of the radios then whooped for joy when it hummed and came on-line. But no matter what frequency she typed, we heard nothing but crashing-ocean static.

Arlene took her time, running carefully by five mega-hertz jumps up the entire spectrum; then she tried the same procedure with different radios. The results were the same.

“Fly, this doesn’t make sense,” she said finally.

“They couldn’t be blocking the signal somehow?” I asked.

“These antennas stick half a kilometer off the surface of Deimos! Whatever’s blanking the signal must be enveloping the entire moon.”

Time to put on the thinking cap. I even paced. “Arlene,” I said at last, “every radio I came across on Phobos was smashed.”

“Same with me.”

“Now here is a vitally important communications room that they couldn’t possibly miss . . .”

“You’re assuming an intelligent enemy here,” she said.

“There has to be, Arlene! Phobos and Deimos are part of the same invasion. Why leave this room intact, but not the ones on Phobos?”

“Fly, Deimos was abandoned four years ago. I was present when the Marines picked up everything and left. Budget cuts, reduction in force, and a lack of tactical imagination sent us packing.”

I nodded, sitting on the floor with my back to the wall, at an angle where I had an unobstructed view of the door. “A big mistake,” I said.

She was on a roll: “What if the aliens invaded back then? Or some time ago—weeks, months, or longer. They could take their time spreading through the facility . . . and there’d be no reason to smash the radios here on alien-controlled Deimos.”

We listened to the symphony of white noise. “So why can’t we reach anyone now, Arlene?”

When enough crazy stuff happens all at once, the imagination is free to float off like that damned pump-kin. I didn't know if it was inspiration or not, but I asked the trillion-dollar question: "Maybe Deimos is no longer in orbit around Mars?"

I was so used to the way she liked to watch me through slitted eyes that when she stared at me wide-eyed, she looked like a different person. "I never thought of that," she said. "It would explain Deimos vanishing from the screens. I just assumed it was destroyed somehow."

Having started down the twisting path, I ran to keep up. "You said Deimos is so small that gravitational effects are negligible. It's more like a giant spaceship than a planet."

We stared at each other. Inspiration can be catching. "But how do you remove an entire moon instantaneous-ly," she mused, "even one as small as Deimos?"

I don't spend all my time on target practice and working out; sometimes I read. "By shifting it into a different dimension?"

She smiled. "Fly, you've been watching too many sci-fi trideos."

"I don't know about that, A.S.; but special F/X will never be convincing again after facing the real thing."

"What makes you think we'll ever see another movie?"

Neither of us spoke for a bit; then Arlene continued.

"So suppose they've turned Deimos into a giant space-ship," she said. "Where would they be taking us? Back to their home world?"

"With us as prime specimens?" I said, not feeling the least bit comfortable about the idea. "Whatever the destination, I've got a bad feeling about this."

"Any destination is probably bad for us," she agreed.

"We could be in some kind of artificial wormhole on the way to hell."

"As if this weren't hell already! Besides, I'm not religious, Fly; I didn't go to any parochial school."

My mind's eye conjured up old images from the Chapel of Mary and Martha. Sister Lucrezia, who taught us Dante's Inferno, acted as if she'd just returned from a special tourist-class trip through the infernal regions and couldn't wait to share her Bad News

for Modern Man. One July weekend at Saint Malachi Summer Camp, I saw her in full regalia, standing up in a rowboat and pushing off from the dock with a long oar. I thought I'd seen a vision of Charon the Boatman, ferrying lost souls across the River Styx. I doubt any monster here could beat her out for the job.

I was half convinced I was already on a one-way trip to the real place. But the idea that Arlene was coming along drove me mad with anger. I wasn't about to let one stinking demon-claw touch that noble soul of hers.

Arlene stood up from the useless radios. "I've been trying to get a fix on the enemy, some handle; but all I'm doing is drawing blanks. I've had the experience of running down corridors before," she confided, "with dozens of armed men out for my blood. Sometimes your best chance for survival is to go right into the rooms and corridors they hold and destroy whatever they came for. We made our way into the embassy vault and burned all our important documents ... and the KPLA left. You know what I'm talking about?"

"I'm glad you got out of there, A.S. It was a real hellhole."

"Yeah, I wouldn't miss this hell pit for the world."

I stared at the radios myself. Yep . . . that's a radio, all right, I thought, which is about as far as my education in electronic communications gear went.

Why on Earth—on Deimos—would the Corps give up such a strategic position as this station? By Executive Order number whatever, the Marines had military jurisdiction on all extraterrestrial planetary surfaces; the Navy had deep space; the Air Force had atmospheric; and the Army had Earth itself.

Mars, Phobos, and Deimos were surely ours to the bone. The only reason I could imagine us giving it up was if the other services conspired to cut our space-ops budget. . . with pretty disastrous consequences. Wonder if anybody felt shame about that, or would if we lived to tell anyone?

"Round of ammo for your thoughts," she said.

"Nothing important. Politics back on the old home planet."

"At least there's no politics here. Unless you count that swastika."

"You saw it, too?" I was beginning to wonder if I'd dreamed that damned crooked cross. "That's not politics; it's a bad joke."

“You think they put it there to scare us, huh? The way they—what do you call it? rework—the physical buildings gives me the creeps.”

“Nothing from Earth scares me after what I’ve seen, Arlene. What’s next, a hammer and sickle?”

“A what?”

“Never mind. You’re too young to remember. I’ll make you a bet that we don’t find any other symbols from the home planet.”

We shook hands. “You’ll lose,” she said. “You are thinking too much about politics. I win if we find any symbols, including religious symbols . . . and there’ve been plenty enough of those.”

“Damn, you’re right. I lose. All the Satan stuff.”

She could sound like a professor when she wanted to:

“Maybe the demons—the aliens—were confused by Hollywood into thinking the swastika is a satanic symbol. It sure seems suspiciously like somebody had an official list of Things that Scare Westerners . . . like they knew it would be seen by UAC workers and Marines, not by Native American Indians or Japanese. Wonder if they’d change the symbols for different humans, say using the letters kyo or oni if they were invading the Nippon Electric space station?

“In any case, the religious symbols are terrestrial, so you lose, Corporal.”

Now it was my turn to grin. “Well, Arlene, if you are going to lose a bet, it’s good to find out before you set the amount.” She gave me a playful punch in the shoulder. We started out while I massaged the numbness out of my arm. At the next inverted cross we passed, I’d pay anything she wanted. Within reason.

-20

The video map showed us how to get to the central elevator for all of the Deimos installation. We were very near. All that separated us from our goal was a wall.

The wall had a switch, a full-body bas relief of a cloven-hoofed alien. And it wasn’t his tongue that required flicking.

My face flushed. “Um, you’d better take this one, PFC Sanders.

“And here I thought you were a born lever-puller.” Arlene flicked the switch; the blue-gray wall cranked down into a slit in the floor, revealing a spacious lift. “Deluxe service,” Arlene said, pointing at the labeled bank of elevator buttons. We’d made it through the Containment Area. Below us was the Refinery, then Deimos Lab, the Command Center, the Central Hall, and three levels below that which were unlabeled.

“Basement? Skip the crap?” I said.

“Hmm. Yeah, well, maybe.”

“Maybe? Makes sense to me. Every time that door

slides open, we run the risk of being stormed by giant vampire slugs from the planet Pornos, or being machine-gunned to death by Nazi schutzstaffel.”

“Fly, these lifts didn’t work too well even back when we had people maintaining them! They got stuck all the time. If the sensors detected anything in the shaft, you stopped at the floor above. If a door was open some-where, the whole elevator could freeze. Go ahead and push the basement button . . . I’ll bet you a month’s pay we won’t make it more than a couple of levels; then we’ll have to find another lift somewhere.”

I looked at her and snorted. “You’re so full of good cheer. Well, ready or not, here goes nothing.”

Here went nothing, all right.

I pushed the button; we started with a jerk and ground downward, skewing back and forth dangerously. As we descended toward the refinery, I saw that the lift didn’t take us there directly, but to a warehouse section we’d have to pass through first. In the distance we had an actual view of the refinery through large, gaping holes in the floors and ceilings. Some kind of fighting had gone on here.

We had descended some fifty meters. What we could see of the refinery was laid out like an open maze; it was possible to see in the distance an expanse of pink, moving objects that looked like fleshy cubes or blocks. I hoped they weren’t alive, weren’t the next creatures on the hit parade. They were gigantic, reminding me of the “organic ladder” and the pulsing walls back on Phobos. Then we’d moved past the point where we could see the refinery. Our descent brought us to a more normal scene.

“Normal” in this case meant a warehouse area stuffed with UAC boxes to the height of twelve feet or more and so densely packed as to create their own pseudo-corridors. We’d

noticed a number of humanoid figures with the familiar brown hide and white spikes scurrying for cover . . . back in imp country again.

The lift stopped, not quite all the way to the floor; we had to jump down about three meters.

Arlene peeked over the edge. “You owe me a month’s pay, Corporal Flaggart.”

“Did I take the bet? I don’t recall saying any such thing.”

“Native American giver.”

We hopped out onto the ugliest, puke-green marble I’d ever seen; but it was still good to have something solid underfoot.

“All right, PFC Sanders, let’s do this by the numbers.”

“Sure, Fly. So which box is number one? And how come we never do stuff by the letters?” I threw her a withering glance, like an older brother to a pesky sister. We were ready to rock and roll.

Fighting demons had spoiled me. I liked an enemy that didn’t shoot back. We popped through the warehouse like nobody’s business, pulse galloping, keyed to instant reaction. The refinery had its share of toxic ooze. We didn’t pay it any mind, but so far, there were only a few sticky regions instead of slime beach. I looked for barrels of the stuff, my favorite way of dealing with imps; but there were none.

The first fireball missed us by a country klick. The second came too close to Arlene to suit me, so after I killed the imp, I wasted ammo . . . and killed him again to teach him a lesson. They were smart enough to duck in and out of the natural defenses provided by the stacked boxes, but not enough to gang up on us or show any other sign of working together. None of these guys were talking.

Still, there were a lot more of them than there were of us. One almost got me from behind. If he’d had a partner, I’d have been dead meat. Instead, Arlene slid in behind the both of us and used her bayonet like a can opener. Busy as I was staying alive, I could appreciate the sheer grace of Arlene, back to the wall of boxes, cradling her shotgun like a baby; never mind dogs as “man’s best friend.”

With hand gestures I indicated who would take which section. Another fifteen minutes and we were back in the same place. She’d killed more than I had. The warehouse area had been cleared.

I was tired enough to wish one of those magical blue spheres would make an appearance. I hadn't told her about that because it seemed too unbelievable, even in a place like this. But Arlene the mind reader had brought a small black case back with her. It looked medical. I'd have to start calling her "Doc."

Opening it, she produced a syringe filled with clear liquid, labeled "cardiac augmentation stimulation unit." I held it for a second, then carefully passed it back to her as if it were a loaded weapon.

"Can't believe I found this," she said. "It's synthetic adrenaline to be used on patients who are in the throes of cardiac arrest."

"What would it do to you or me?"

She paused, biting her lip again. "In a normal person, the adrenaline rush would make you super strong. There's a drawback, though; it could also give you tachycardia and kill you."

"Just say no to having an edge," I commented, taking the black package and its contents and adding it to my collection.

"Fly, maybe we should toss it. That stuff could be too much of a temptation."

"Hey, if push comes to shove, we can inject one of them with it, right up their monster fundaments. All in the interests of science."

The only unlocked door led to a huge, green marble chamber with a collection of weird, red pillars. Pulsing veins stretched around these pillars like living ropes. The sharp, cloying odor of perspiration combined with the sick-sweet stench of rotting meat. Mechanical stuff was fine with me, even organic stuff like the arboretum. But I didn't like it when they combined, and I couldn't tell where one part left off and the other began. The throbbing of the veins matched the throbbing in my head.

I was almost grateful for the appearance of a number of imps. At least they took my mind off the architecture. Then some more imps . . . and some more after that.

Too much of a good thing.

"Check your six, Fly," said Arlene.

I looked behind me, across the room; sure enough, even more snot-spitting spinys.

My gratitude faded fast. I made out a dozen imps.

I started the donnybrook with a well-aimed shell; between their fireballs and our shotguns, we had one serious firefight. I thought the pillars would catch fire, so thick were the red flames and black smoke.

I killed two. Arlene killed three. The survivors were better than the previous imps at dodging behind the pillars, and even our shotgun extender mags were running dry. They forced us back into a corner, pinning us down. Mexican standoff time. I wanted to bail.

Then I pumped, and the slide locked! Nothing up my sleeve; nothing in my gun.

Now what?

Time to even the odds. Arlene was watching the imps, firing off a shot now and then, looking down at her mag window and frowning.

I reached inside my vest, pulled a hypodermic and studied it. Intravenous? No, intramuscular. Well, that was easier, at least. But could I actually do it? To myself? Jesus, what a dilemma.

For a moment it was like being back on Phobos. That needle bothered me more than flaming mucus in my face. Without question, the next scientific revolution should move beyond the need for needles. But more important, could I risk a heart attack if I had a bad reaction?

Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, I'm a Marine! Semper fi, Mac.

I gave myself the shot.

At first, nothing; then the stuff stimulated my adrenal glands; and in a minute I was filled with red rage! The world turned crimson and my breath was fire. My heart beat so fast that it spun in my chest like a gyroscope. I drew my bayonet from my webbing and bolted from the corner; if Arlene yelled after me, I didn't hear it.

All that mattered was to kill, getting in tight and cutting the steak. Blood-rare—God, how I loved imp blood, thick as red ink from a shattered paint stick, communion wine splashing on the floors of eternity.

Every motion was a target to strike. Flesh was too easy. Bone was the real work, the blade sticking in the cartilage, the cracking and crunching inspiring me to greater efforts. I hardly noticed the blood splashing in my eyes. The world was already a red haze; liquid salt was trivial pain as I swung my blade in the center of adrenal agony.

The more I killed, the heavier the weight in my arms. But exhaustion spurred me to

greater fury. I no longer saw the Chinese-mask faces of the imps, only a blur. Their claws rent my flesh, but we were too tight for them to use their best weapon.

Dimly I realized that I was bleeding from many wounds. That was fine with me. Blood kept me warm, theirs, mine, anyone's . .. just so that I could continue to swing a blade and slay the bastards. Motion must be met with motion.

An imp exploded in front of me before I could even reach it. Only one imp left now.

"Fly!" A voice called my name, near at hand. I hadn't expected any of these imps to speak, especially not in a high, almost feminine voice, calling my name. I was so surprised that I hesitated for a moment, blade poised over the last imp.

"Fly!"

My vision began to clear. My arm was a bar of lead, my chest a sharp pain, as the old heart slowed to merely fast. The fury slowly lifted from me like a thick, red, trideo theater curtain drawing back. The hazy shape before me grew solid and took on familiar features, Arlene's features.

I was very glad that I hadn't killed that last imp.

-21

They're all dead," she reported. "Are you all right, Fly?"

"Thirsty," I croaked. My own canteen had split open during the fight, spilling its contents. She shared water from her supplies.

"Better?" she asked.

I nodded, utterly spent.

I almost fell as she helped me out of the room. She set me down, held my arm. My mind still raced, but my body was exhausted.

Arlene made me rest twenty minutes, then reluctantly helped me up so we could move on.

We walked past the secure area, beyond the pillar room, and faced another closed door. It was hardly worth kicking. On the other side was a shimmering floor of the noxious

slime, across which was a console with a blue key card. “Doesn’t look too promising,” Arlene said.

I was never optimistic where toxic goo was concerned; but my head was still flying from the adrenaline, a perfect recipe to make a volunteer.

“I’ll go,” I said. “I could use the exercise. Jogging is just what my heart needs right now.”

“You need to rest, Fly!”

That was thoughtful of her. I appreciated her sentiments as I evaded her grasp and stepped into the gunk, my boots making shunk-shoosh sounds, slowing me down and eating bit by bit through the thick soles. Then I stepped on something hard and felt it shift under me. Heavy machine sounds came up through the slime, followed by something more substantial. A section of floor rose through the toxin.

Staggering was not a good idea. I didn’t want to fall down in this. I regained my footing as I saw a wire-mesh platform rising to match a set of blue-paneled lights directly overhead. I was just about to take steps when Arlene brushed past, turned, and stepped to the right to follow the path that was under those lights.

As she ran out of the pathway an odd thing happened. More wire mesh rose to meet her footsteps, correspond-ing to the lights above, winking like the stars I hoped I would live long enough to see again. I followed her. A major improvement over the normal way of crossing the slimelands—did any other spills have such shortcuts installed, I wondered?

When we reached the “island” on the other side of the green ocean, Arlene said, “You may have something with that rats-in-the-maze idea.”

“No human would design this, except maybe a game show host.”

“Game is right. I wonder if the entire moon has been reworked?” She reached over and grabbed the blue key card.

We found a door with pretty, blue trim; the key card popped it open. Inside, I whooped with pleasure to see my old buddy, the rocket launcher, with lots of little battery rockets as well as another AB-10 machine pistol.

The body of an imp lay in a corner. “Think that one died of natural causes?” Arlene asked.

“Unnatural more likely.”

“Say,” she said, “if imps are smart enough to talk, why don’t they use weapons?”

It was a good question . . . one of many that had started to gnaw at me. “Maybe because it wouldn’t be fair,” I said.

“Excuse me?” Arlene’s eyebrows shot skyward. “I must have misheard; it sounded like you said they don’t use weapons because it wouldn’t be fair.”

“Let me rephrase ... it would be a fair test of our defensive ability. The mastermind—whoever, whatever

—wouldn’t learn much except what we look like when we die ... and God knows, it already knows that well enough.”

After a moment of silent thought, Arlene whispered, “I don’t like it, Fly; it makes me feel like we’re being watched.”

“You think I’m paranoid?”

“I didn’t say I didn’t agree; I don’t like the implications, that the whole invasion of the Martian moons is just practice, a war game, just the prelude to . ..”

“To what?”

“We’d damn well better find out, Flynn Taggart.”

Arlene took the AB-10. I took the sweet darling that could kill minotaurs and open doors.

We didn’t run into any trouble on our way to the other lift on this level; it was clearly marked on the video map. Maybe that was because there was so much trouble in the refinery. There must be a Law of Conservation of Tsouris. But the buttons for all levels below the next were inoperative. It was a local shuttle only. Arlene made triumphant noises, but I reminded her that we never did have a bet on.

Only way out is down, I repeated, and pressed the button. Whatever Arlene said, I still thought my primary duty was to get her the hell out of hell; but at the moment, her path and my path were the same: we both needed to burn deeper into the nightmare.

“I don’t like the look of this place,” said Arlene as we stepped from the lift into a vine-covered hallway.

“What’s not to like? Rows of skulls, walls covered with squirming, writhing, fleshy

ivy ... should be like high school by now."

We gave the tendrils a wide berth; they looked like they might loop around our throats and strangle the life from us.

"Fly," Arlene whispered, "I see another lift right through there." She pointed to the left, at a gap in the ivy on that side where I suddenly realized there was no wall—only the squirming expanse of "plant" life.

"Uh-oh," I said. There was more on the other side than a room with a lift in it. There were our old friends, the demons . . . imps, too.

We dropped back from the window while the imps began to hiss and heave flaming spitwads. Then my pal Arlene froze my marrow with a professionally calm voice in my ear: "Fly, I think we're going to need the rocket launcher, too."

I was already getting ready to rock 'n' roll when I turned to see a pair of giant, floating pumpkins trapped in a cage ahead of us. I could have sworn that spot was empty when we first came in here! Maybe the cage had been lowered just now.

If it had been demons, we could have ignored them; but the bars were spaced far enough apart that the pumpkins had all the space they needed to fire their deadly ball-lightning.

There was no telling why these heads were locked up; but it meant no more security for us than caged machine gunners.

The air crackled above us; electrical discharge ran thousands of prickling little fingers down my head and back, and our hair stood at attention. Arlene looked like a Goosh Ball. Focusing my concentration on the single task of standing up and firing, I heard her shout, "I'll take our nine!" referring to the maddened imps and demons to our left, at the "nine o'clock" position, ripping through the ivy.

We ducked as the fireballs seared the same area where the balls of lightning had played electric hairdresser. I wished the imps and pumpkins were only closer together, so that the fireballs and lightning balls might cross paths and wipe out both monster lines.

I nearly got my wish. Arlene opened up with the AB-10; when the imps returned fire, they hit their demon buddies. . . the rest was history. While demons swallowed imps, who did their best to give a horrible case of heartburn, I squeezed the firing ring, turning the pump-kin cage into an oven to bake pumpkin pie.

"Are you all right?" I asked. I could tell from the way she was shaking her head that she hadn't been this close to the rocket explosions before.

“As soon as the phone stops ringing between my ears,” she answered.

“Pack a wallop, don’t they?”

I was still worrying about the giant blocks of flesh as we skirted the cage and entered an empty, gray room. “They used to use a lot of chambers around here to crush ore and refine the liquid,” Arlene explained. “Be careful . . . lots of dangerous equipment.” Indeed, I could hear some heavy machinery

really earning its keep right nearby. But what?

No platforms or lifts, no rising staircases; then Arlene won the prize by looking straight overhead.

“Holy ore-crusher, Batman!” she yelped.

The damned ceiling was descending on us. Not too fast, but fast enough. “Didn’t I see this in a trideo?” I asked, edging back the way we’d come.

“It’s just too Edgar Allan poetic,” said Arlene.

We backed out before turning into grease spots. “Now what?”

“Hate to say it, Fly . . . but there ain’t no other way to book. There must be a door or something in there—if we can find it and pop it before they have to scrape us up with a spatula.”

The ceiling hit bottom, then rose again at the same stately pace. “We could hunt for another route past this garlic press,” she said hesitantly. “But I’m pretty sure this is the only direct route around to Sector Nine, where we were looking through the ivy window at the other lift. At least, that’s how I remember it from when I was posted here.

“Look, Fly, let me go in and hunt; I know what this place is like better than you.”

I hated the thought—Arlene under the crushing ceiling while I waited outside, “guarding”! But . . she had a point.

Flashlight in one hand, Arlene ran to the opposite end of the room while the ceiling was still rising. She rubbed her palm gently across the smooth surface.

“How are you doing?” my voice was strong enough to call out.

“I can’t find any switches!” she called. Worried, I started pacing in front of the Poe

chamber, a restless sentry. Arlene found nothing . . . but would you believe it? I triggered a motion sensor, causing a door to slide open near her. It was pure, dumb luck.

“Come on,” she shouted. The ceiling had reached the top and was descending again. I ducked my head like a halfback center-punching through the line and bolted across the room through the door—which had already begun to close as the ceiling fell.

The door led to the room I’d seen from above, with huge, fleshy cubes rising and falling, an alien mockery of the ore-crushers.

But the blocks weren’t just flesh; they were alive. Twenty-five pink, fleshy pumping platforms completely covering a room seemed more pointless than disgusting. They made high, whining sounds like newborn infants.

“What the hell are they?” I asked.

“Wonder if they can move out of those holes in the floor?”

“Christ,” I added, “what do they do?”

Arlene edged closer to one block. She squatted and rose with it, following it down and up. “This isn’t just random flesh, Fly; this is muscle tissue. Human muscle tissue.”

I approached another block. “This is a heart or liver or something.” I tracked along the edge of blocks. The last of the five blocks comprised convoluted ridges and furrows, folds in a grayish, spongy medium. “Unless my grandma’s been lying all these years,” I said, “them there’s brains, A.S.”

“Yecch.” We backed away. “All right. . . muscles, brains, some kind of organ meat—this suggest a pattern to you, Fly?”

“Several.” None of them pleasant.

“Are they farming meat, human flesh?”

“That’s the best-case scenario, Arlene.”

She looked at me with eyes widening. “And the worst-case?”

I smiled grimly. “They’re farming humans. They’re getting the hang of growing human cells because they’re trying to genetically engineer zombie-soldiers, better than the pathetic ones they have now.”

We watched the blocks rise and fall a couple more minutes. Then Arlene upspake. “Corporal?”

“Yes, PFC?”

“Permission to hose their research?”

“Permission enthusiastically granted. You have something in mind, Arlene?”

She did. There was a row of torches along the wall we’d entered by. We blew them out, then upended them, spilling the oil as we hopped from block to squishy block. At the far end, I let Arlene light the ceremonial cigarette lighter. It was her idea, after all.

We left the flesh blocks joyously in flame. I supposed the bone block would survive. Well, let the bastards animate skeletons, then!

We bolted down a corridor and turned the corner; there I halted in astonishment. Arlene plowed into me, then she too stared.

Fifteen demons had arranged themselves in a semicircle, backs to us, and they were grunting in unison, giving the impression of speech. Over to the right I noticed a barrel of the ooze.

“Have I ever told you about my barrel trick?” I whispered.

“Back up around the corner.” I followed her, then peered around, lined up my shot very carefully, and gently squeezed the trigger.

The world exploded. The heat blast pressed on my right eye and right hand as I pulled back. The explosion even drowned out the screams of the demons.

When the debris settled and the last piece of pink and red demon flesh flopped to the smooth floor, Arlene nodded. “Impressive,” she pronounced.

Then we found out what the demons had been doing crowded into that semicircle. They had been worshiping.

Out of the smoke and flame strode a hell-prince ... and it was as mad as its name. It burst through the wreckage, throwing pieces of demon and chunks of masonry in all directions, a state-of-the-art minotaur with one hell of a ‘tude.

The hell-prince roared defiance and began firing dead-ly bolts at us from its wrist launchers.

-22

Run!" I shouted as I started loading the rocket launcher. She wasn't listening. Her AB-10 was rattling off hundreds of shots that harmlessly bounced off the hellion. Our only chance was the rocket launcher.

I fired off the first two rockets as I was dancing backward; the force knocked me into Arlene and sent us both sprawling. The AB-10 skidded across the floor, and Arlene went after it on hands and knees. An energy bolt flashed between us, searing my eyeballs for a moment. I didn't care if I could see, so long as I could feel the smooth, metal surfaces of the little D-cell rockets and finish reloading. Just as I finished loading, my vision cleared; the eight-foot hell-prince bore down upon us, surrounded by smoke and stinking of brimstone.

I'd promised myself never, ever to fire off rockets this close to the target! But a good look at that green gorgon face with the ram's horns was all I needed to reassess my position. I squeezed.

The third and fourth direct hits slowed the behemoth to a confused crawl; but still it stood. I could see again—but now I couldn't hear.

Loading, fingers numb, I didn't bother getting back to my feet; I fired from where I lay. I slid past Arlene, who had picked up her machine pistol and was aiming it.

She shielded her eyes and hugged the ground as rockets five and six pounded the same tough chest that had withstood the previous four.

I closed my eyes while sliding; the force of the sound took me like a physical wave, carrying me down the hall. The weight of Mars pressed on my eardrums as I rose groggily to my feet to reload the launcher. The Prince of Hell stood stock-still, eyeing me with a doleful expression.

I aimed and prepared to fire; but the monster made a loud, wheezing sound—a sigh?—and tumbled over, stiff as a statue, to impact directly on its face.

"What in God's name was that?" Arlene gasped, still shaking.

"No naming game for this baby," I said. "Already has a name. You're looking at the same model of Hell Prince you dodged when you slipped through the crack on Phobos, before the Gate. This is what was tramping down the corridor while you scrawled a skull and C-bones on the wall."

She shook her head, clearing alien cobwebs and appearing truly weary for the first time. “Boy, if the light had been better, you’d have been on your own, Fly, ‘cause I sure as hell wouldn’t have wasted two seconds making a mark with that mother staring me in the face.”

“Oh yes you would have.”

“Egomaniac.”

We needed all the cheering we could give each other.

Picking through the carcasses, it seemed unfair that our only reward would be more ooze exactly where we needed to go.

“Damn,” said Arlene, “the whole place looks flooded.”

“You came up with the jogging theory,” I reminded her. “Let’s find out how good it is.”

I shouldn’t have said anything, for then she insisted on going first, running through the middle of the toxin. I followed close behind, feeling the pain right through my soles. We didn’t quite manage to jog, but we did keep up a brisk walk.

The toxin slowed us down with a sucking, gripping quality; each second made me feel like it had been too long since my last check-up. I kept wishing for another of those crazy blue spheres to show up: I was beginning to wonder if I’d imagined the first.

All bad things come to an end. We finally made it around the facility to the other elevator in Sector 9, not ten feet from where we’d started, if only we’d been able to shove through the flesh-ivy. I was beginning to hate the ooze more than I did the monsters . . . except when it was in barrels.

The lift was the antique kind with a lever to start and stop, rather than buttons. We had a hell of a time trying to get it to stop at the next level down.

The level started with a teleporter; not a good sign, far as I was concerned. “My turn to go first,” I said; Arlene didn’t argue.

By the time she arrived, thirty seconds later, I was back at work. I’d killed three imps and five former soldiers/ workers, a more dim-witted than usual zombie collection.

“My turn to rescue you,” she said; but this was duck soup after the hell-prince. Heck, most of the zombies weren’t even armed!

“We’re getting good at this,” I said.

“Don’t get cocky,” she warned. I let it pass without remark.

A platform lowered as we approached, as if inviting us into the parlor; still feeling cocky despite Arlene’s warning, I stepped aboard. Arlene followed, of course.

At the top, I took a turn and came face to face with another hell-prince, holding a blue key card in its claws!

“Get it—get it!” Arlene shouted; I didn’t know whether she meant the card or the monster ... but in either case, I had only four rockets left, not enough!

I jerked up the launcher, then paused, staring. Some-thing was weird. Then I realized: we were nose-to-snout, and the thing hadn’t screamed yet.

Or moved. I edged closer ... It was frozen solid, like it had seen a gorgon from Greek mythology. Turned to stone.

Heart pounding like a pile driver, I stepped close and gently plucked the blue key card from its claw. Then I rejoined Arlene on the floor, still shaking.

Toxic waste literally surrounded us, the dry space where we stood like an island. The light was good enough to see other raised machinery platforms making islands in this sea.

Arlene found a pole of thin metal. She tapped around for shallow parts and traced a crossable path to the first “island”; then she repeated the process until we made it through the toxic goop and into blue-glowing corridor.

At least the color of the corridor made me glad to have the blue key card. On cue, we ran into a blue-trimmed door at the end of the corridor. We crossed into a narrow corridor with red-glowing walls, floor, and ceiling, so bright that it hurt our eyes. We heard a familiar thud-thud at the end of the hall; it sounded like more flesh blocks.

Variety is the spice of life, even on Deimos. The sounds came from a piece of stamping machinery that didn’t seem to be the least bit organic. I was grateful for that.

“Oh, great,” said Arlene, “some jerk has tossed another key card onto the base.” The implication was that we couldn’t walk away from something so valuable as another computer key card.

A giant, metal piston repeatedly smashed down to within a few centimeters of the base,

stamping anything on the base into powder. “Arlene, why would anyone put the card out for us, except as bait? We don’t need it.”

“We used the blue card to get this far,” she insisted.

“What’s behind the mystery yellow door?”

“But Arlene .. .” She was through listening. The only way to get the yellow key card was to slide across the base, grab it, and roll off the other side before the stamping part came down to turn the contestant into pate.

She backed away, measuring the piston’s rise and fall with her eyes. I was about to stop her and tell her about the patented Fly technique for opening doors; then I remembered my meager supply of rockets.

“At least let me do that,” I said.

“You? Corporal Two-left-feet on the drill field?”

I opened my mouth to angrily protest; then I realized she was right—understating it, if anything. I never could get the timing right on anything more complicated than dress-right-dress or point-and-shoot.

My heart in my mouth, I watched Arlene count, timing the piston. Then quickly, before she could think better of it or I could object again, she jumped just as it hit the low point and started to rise again.

Arlene sprinted across the room and threw herself into a face-first baseball slide, scooping the key card in her arms. She slid to a halt... but she was still on the base!

For an instant she froze. I couldn’t possibly reach her in time—and a horrible image flashed through my mind.

If Arlene died, in the next cycle, I knew I would jump on the machine and die alongside her.

Thank God I didn’t have to make that decision; at the last second she made a panic roll off the platform.

Arlene left the key card on the stamper, near the edge; but it was a simple matter, when the piston rose, to scoop it off from where she stood.

She pocketed it... and good thing; past the stamping machine was a thick airlock door,

tough as a bank vault, surrounded by yellow lights. I doubt a rocket would even have scratched the chrome. Maybe a SAM.

The yellow key card let us into a central, circular corridor surrounding a giant, cylindrical room. We took a lift down into the room; once inside, the lift moved up again.

“Uh, Fly, I don’t see any switch to bring it back down.” Damned if she wasn’t right.

From inside, the lift door looked like a spine with ribs coming out of it. Once again, no human would ever have made anything like this. The aliens were definitely re-working Deimos, and had been for some time.

“I don’t like their interior decorator,” she said, as if reading my mind. She tilted her head in the direction of the latest attraction. A row of what looked like red spittoons stretched out of sight, and on each one there was a skull bathed in red light.

“If these were human minds, I’d say they were psychotic,” I commented.

“You know something, Fly? Every monster we’ve seen has a head too large or strangely shaped to be mistaken for a human head.”

“Yes.”

“Then how do you account for the skulls? Whether they’re designs on walls or ceilings or whole skulls like these, they’re all human.”

“And they couldn’t have been taken from us, not all of them; with all the zombies and unbeheaded corpses, who’d be left?”

She touched one. “This isn’t real,” she said. “More like metal than bone.”

I turned it over, looking at it from different angles. “I’ll bet it’s meant to scare us, same as the freakin’ swastika. Well, we’re past being bothered by Halloween.”

I instantly regretted my choice of words. No sooner would I toss a challenge into the air than it would be answered. Was someone watching our every move?

This time it was a horde of imps, zombies, and a couple of pumpkins coming around the curve of the room, screaming doom in our ears. Fortunately, they were only coming at us from the one direction. We would have had no chance if attacked from both directions.

Arlene dropped flat, and I let fly with my last rockets. I ignored the imps, concentrating

on the two pumpkins, the greater threat.

Somebody got careless on the other side, and soon all the monsters were mixing it up among themselves.

We drew back around the curve and waited for silence; then we slid back and smoked the survivors with shotgun and AB-10. I still had one last rocket.

In the course of the fight, somebody—us or them—accidentally activated a switch in the floor that caused part of a staircase to rise. When the last pumpkin smashed into orange and blue slime against the ruined head of the last assassinated imp, we started up the steps. Arlene activated the next switch.

Another set of steps rose, and we took them to the third switch and set of stairs. At the top we found a teleporter.

We stepped aboard one at a time, me first, teleporting to a long corridor with barred windows looking outside. Arlene bent over for a closer view and pulled back with a gasp.

“Let me guess,” I said. “You didn’t see the stars or Mars.”

Swallowing hard, she motioned for me to look for myself. She wasn’t in the mood for humor. Blood had drained from her face, a reaction I’d never before seen in Arlene. I put my face against the window.

As a child, I’d seen a painting in a museum that gave me my first nightmare. I hadn’t thought of it in years; but now it came back to me.

Beyond the window was a river of human faces, hundreds of them, each an island in an ocean of flesh. Each face had a horrified expression stamped on it, each a damned soul.

The spectacle achieved its purpose. We were both distracted. Otherwise we wouldn’t have been so careless as to allow a stomping, single-minded demon to get close enough to clamp its jaws on Arlene’s back and shoulder.

Her cries were echoed by each face in the river of damned souls, each screaming Arlene’s pain and torment.

Arlene!" I shouted. I grabbed the monster with my hands and literally pulled it off her before it could position itself to take a second and certainly lethal bite.

It stumbled clumsily. I grabbed the AB-10 and pumped two dozen rounds into its open, blood-caked maw. It didn't get up.

I was almost afraid to touch her. Blood pumped out of the horrible, fatal wound.

Arlene was dying.

Her face was sallow, eyes vacant and staring. One pupil was dilated, the other contracted to a pinpoint. There was nothing I could do, not even with a full medical lab.

But damn her, she was not going to die here and join that river of faces.

As gently as I could, I lifted Arlene's bleeding body in my arms and carried her out of that circle of hell. Her rasping breath was a call to arms, a signal that life and hope still remained in the young gal.

I set her down at the end of the corridor; the lift door was blocked by a river of what appeared to be lava. Hoping the red stuff was at least no worse than the green stuff, I dashed across into an alcove where a single switch mocked me.

I flipped it, causing a path to rise up through the "lava." So far, so good. I ran back, grabbed Arlene, and walked across the path as quickly as possible.

At the last step before reaching the lift, I heard a grinding noise from behind. I paused and looked back: a new path rose slowly, leading to an alcove hidden from view except from where I now stood.

The cubbyhole contained another one of the blue-face spheres that I thought I'd never see again, the one item that I had hesitated to tell Arlene about because it seemed so incredible.

The sight was like another of the adrenaline bursts. Quickly, before the path could lower again, I powered her across, not bothering to stop and pick up pieces of equipment that fell from us, some landing on the path, some lost in the lava. I had a great terror that the sphere would fly away just before I got there, like a carnival balloon just out of reach.

I reached it, hesitated for a moment—then literally threw Arlene onto the sphere to make sure I wouldn't be the one to touch it first.

With a nearly audible silent pop, the blue liquid was all over her; and the red liquid on

her body, the blood, evaporated into the blue. Arlene sat up and coughed, looking like someone coming out of a deep sleep.

“How do you feel?”

“My shoulder hurts like a son of a bitch. What the hell happened?”

“Pinkie decided to have you for a midnight snack. I put him on a diet. You sure you’re all right?”

Standing up, she shook her arm, staring in wonder at the shredded sleeve and tooth marks. “What in God’s name did you do to me?”

I figured the time had finally come to tell her about the • magical blue spheres. She had no trouble believing me.

Only my pistol and some shotgun shells had been lost to the lava. Weapons in hand, we slid into the elevator and pressed the only floor button, labeled Command Center.

The lift had barely begun to grind slowly downward when suddenly Arlene reached past me and pushed the red “kill” button. The elevator stopped, falling silent.

“Why did you kill the power?”

She stared at me before answering. For a moment I had

a terrible fear that something had gone wrong with the blue sphere and she was going to turn into a zombie in front of me. Instead she asked, “Fly, are you starving, or is it just me?” I shook my head. She continued: “Maybe it’s that blue thing, but I’m so famished I could swallow one of those pink demons.”

“How about floating pumpkin pie for dessert?”

“And I’m suddenly exhausted. Fly, I need some sleep.” I had completely lost track of the supplies.

Arlene hadn’t. “Don’t you ever listen to training videos? Never wander into battle without MREs.” She demonstrated the truth of her maxim. Suddenly, I realized I was hungrier than I thought. A Meal Ready to Eat sounded like the finest, gourmet cuisine in the solar system.

“A stopped elevator as a secure base. I never would’ve thought of it.”

“Next best thing to a Holiday Inn,” she added, raising an eyebrow. Arlene showed a domestic side that sur-prised me. While we talked, she took the packages of freeze-dried food and mixed them in the water of her canteen. “Sorry it’ll be cold,” she said as I watched her shake the contents with the skill of a bartender preparing the perfect martini.

“That’s all right, beautiful. I like cold—” I picked up the package, glanced at the title. “—cold beef stew.”

I also liked the fact that Arlene was alive. As we chowed down, I felt the strongest emotions since finding her on Deimos.

Maybe she sensed the inappropriate feelings coming off me in waves. She lowered her head and blinked rapidly, as if stopping herself from crying by main force.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“Don’t want to tell you.”

“Why not?”

She hesitated. “Willy,” she said. “PFC Dodd.”

“Oh.” I squirmed uncomfortably.

“I’ve been forcing myself not to think about him. He’s dead, isn’t he? Or ... worse.”

“You don’t know that! I thought you were dead or reworked, but I found you alive.”

“Find anybody else?”

I didn’t say anything.

“Fly, I’ve accepted the fact. That he’s dead, I mean. I don’t think I could face—the other possibility.” She looked up, her eyes moist but not tearing. “Promise me something.”

“Anything possible.”

“If we find him and he is, you know . . . and if I can’t do it... will you? Promise? And don’t mention him again.”

I nodded, not trusting myself to speak. Funny lump in my throat. Yeah, babe; I’ll be happy to blow away my rival for your hand if he should happen to turn up a zombie. No

problemo!

She changed the subject, wrenching my mind back on the primary issue. “Fly, I think it’s pretty likely that the aliens we’re fighting aren’t the same ones who built the Gates.”

“I was wondering about that myself,” I said. “All this weird stuff, skulls and satanic symbols—there was nothing about the Gates themselves that hinted at this. The Gates don’t look like a Vincent Price movie.”

“There’s nothing eldritch about the Gates,” she said. I was starting to like that word. “So let’s assume these aliens found the Gates and discovered a way to turn them on from the other end. But why do they look so much like human-style demons?”

“Genetic engineering?” I suggested. “They could be deliberately designed to look like our conception of hell, particularly the hell-princes. They’re the dead give-aways.”

“Can’t you find some other word than dead?” she begged, a fleck of red tomato paste on her lips.

“The hell-princes are just too much like medieval drawings of the devil to be natural.”

“Unless they really are hell-princes,” Arlene said.

I shook my head, unwilling to consider that possibility.

So we sat in silence for a moment, finishing our food and drink. Much more thinking along these lines and I’d be ready to take communion again.

“I was never really afraid of monsters as a child,” Arlene finally said. “Grown-ups were scary enough by themselves.”

“Why invade at all? What is this for?”

“Good question,” she said. “Here’s another: If they can genetically engineer imps and demons, why do they need human zombie-slaves? And why grow human flesh?”

“Maybe they want super-zombies, more powerful than these dead excuses for lemmings, but still able to pass among us undetected.”

Arlene yawned, struggling to show enthusiasm. “But that may be their weakness, Fly. The zombies don’t amount to much. You and I aren’t scared by skulls and evil symbols. What if there is a finite number of the actual monsters and they can’t easily recreate them? What if the monsters too are ‘reworked’ from other creatures, creatures the

mastermind has to breed and raise? That would mean every horrible creature we kill is one fewer to invade Earth if they can't be replaced. Until the new, improved pod-people come on-line."

I liked it. "Arlene, if you're right, all we have to do is kill everything . . . and we end the invasion."

We didn't have anything for dessert, so we used imagination to sweeten the conversation. "I've been thinking about the idea they're using Deimos as a spaceship," I said. "How can you move something as large as a whole moon?"

"I was thinking some sort of hyperspace tunnel. Yeah, I know; I've been reading too much sci-fi, Fly."

I didn't say it. At least it was something, a hypothesis. "Maybe there's some way to break through the tunnel walls?" I asked.

"Maybe. But it could also kill us. We don't know if 'outside the walls' has the same physical laws; and even if it does, if there's even any air."

"It could also disrupt what's happening, maybe destroy Deimos and everything on it."

"Including us? But that would throw a monkey wrench in their invasion plans," she said with a smile that turned into a yawn. She wasn't bored. Her eyelids were heavy from exhaustion.

"If these creatures run the moon—the ship," I said, "then what horrors guard the tunnel wall?"

"Those faces couldn't be real, could they? I hated those faces . . ." Her head nodded forward and she snored. It wasn't a very loud snore.

The elevator was as secure a place as we were likely to find. I sat watch and let her sleep. There was an eerie silence despite the faint vibration. After four hours I woke her up.

"Your turn," she insisted, rubbing pieces of sleep from her eyes.

"Don't let me sleep more than three hours."

"Fly, sleep! I command you to sleep," she said, making hypnotic passes. I slept. . . not because of the mystic passes, but because of a mud slogger's ability to sleep anywhere.

I could have done without the dreams.

The river of faces touched something deep in both of us, the place where you store up all your fears and regrets. Going to sleep meant sinking right into that place.

I was tangled in long, sticky fibers like a giant spiderweb, but at the center of the web was a face made of a hundred different faces. I didn't want to look at it; but the face came closer, slowly rotating like a planet, showing different faces spread across its surface, smiles melting into frowns, rows of eyes like so many beads of glass, noses creating an uneven mountain range stretching to the horizon.

Then the sphere of blue faces was pressed right against mine, and it had stopped turning. In the center was the face of my long dead grandfather as I had seen him in the open casket. His toothless mouth was working, lips twisting, but no sounds came out.

I knew what he was saying, though: "Dinna let them rework me, Fianna Flynn, me lad . . . dinna never let them rework us all, b'Gad."

The sticky fibers became tendrils sliding up my nose and into my mouth, choking me. The truth is out there . . .

I woke up in a cold sweat. Arlene was shaking me hard.

"Fly, are you okay?"

"Sleep is overrated," I gasped. I was just as tired as when I'd put my head down. Standing, I felt dizzy. Probably running a fever, but I didn't want to mention it. There was nothing to be done anyway. I pushed the button back in to reactivate the power; then I pushed the floor button, and the elevator continued its trip to the Command Center.

It was a good thing we'd eaten and tried to get some rest. The moment the doors opened, we were in another damned firefight with zombies, imps, pumpkins, and a specter.

The ambush trapped us in the lift. We used the lift doors for cover.

By the time we worked our way out, we'd cleaned a huge room with stairways at either end, leading up to a split-level. There were six pillars; each had its designated nasty hiding behind it.

Pushing through a door at the top of the split-level, we found a gigantic indoor garden or arboretum. The air was thick with pollen from a jungle of fleshy plants overgrowing where some breed of computers used to be.

Arlene sneezed repeatedly. I lucked out. I was so exhausted that maybe I wasn't breathing as deeply. "You can say one thing for the greenhouse," I observed. "Plants are plants here, and not combined with machines."

Blowing her nose—allergies—Arlene added: "And men are men, and so are the women." All that was missing was a handsome horse and blazing six-guns.

The absence of monsters was reason enough to explore. We could breathe later. The primary motif seemed to be a blackish, oily wood that sure as hell never originated on the old home planet. Periodically, the wood bubbled and popped, like ulcerated sores in what-ever monstrous trees had produced it. I imagined a three-headed Paul Bunyan with ax-handle hands cutting the planks.

The ground squished underfoot as we walked; I looked closely and saw incredibly long, wafer-thin insects scoot-ing out from under our feet. We finally reached the end of the arboretum and the vegetation ran out against puke-green marble, just as we'd seen back in the warehouse.

"Will you look at that?" said Arlene, pointing at red-orange curtains of fire crackling beyond the high walls, at a sufficient distance that we weren't roasting.

"Now that's bad taste," I said. "Next they'll have Lieutenant Weems in a red devil suit pop out of a cake."

"Complete with pointy tail?" she asked wryly.

"You have a twisted mind, PFC Sanders."

The better to explore with, I added mentally. I hoped this situation wasn't like those science fiction stories where the terrifying menaces are taken telepathically from the greatest fears of the human beings involved. My worst fears couldn't be this corny!

Arlene found a switch that opened a hidden room; we went with the flow. Entering the chamber, we marveled at how different it was from what we'd seen before. The entire room was constructed of that black, oily, ulcerating wood. There was one object in the room, placed at dead center: a bas relief of a demonic monster more horrible, or more ridiculous, than any we'd fought. Every physical attribute of the thing was exaggerated so that it almost seemed to be a cartoon. The largest protuberance of all was its penis, sticking out at a 45-degree angle.

"They've got to be kidding," said Arlene.

"I hate to bring it up, but that's probably another switch," I suggested.

“I’ve handled worse,” she admitted.

-24

As she flipped the switch, we heard familiar heavy, grinding sounds outside in the marble chamber. Being nearer the door, I took a look-see. I wasn’t the least bit surprised to see a set of stairs rising up in the marble room leading straight up to one of the walls of fire. Arlene joined me in pondering this new development. Neither of us seemed to be in a great hurry to run up those stairs.

“Do you feel fireproof?” she asked me.

“I left my asbestos pajamas back on Earth.”

“Maybe there’s an opening we can’t see from down here.”

“We can only dream,” I sighed. I went first. She was close behind, though. As soon as it became too hot, I had every intention of stopping. I didn’t feel any heat at all.

Arlene noticed as well. “This isn’t a bit like Campfire Girls,” she said. “By now, all the marshmallows in my pocket should be screaming out: ‘Put me on a stick!’”

“You have marshmallows?”

“No.”

“I don’t think it’s a real flame. Wait here, Arlene. If I catch on fire or die of heat stroke, you’ll know there was something wrong with my theory.” Another ten steps up the stairs convinced me that I was definitely on to something. Ten more steps and I was becoming certain. I still wasn’t hot as I walked right up to the curtain of seething flame and very slowly put my hand out.

The hand went right through the fire, disappearing from view without causing Yours Truly the least discomfort. I didn’t even get a blister. “Arlene,” I called out, “the fire is an illusion. Come on up.”

I walked right through, then turned around where the fire should be ... and there was nothing there but the welcome sight of Arlene coming up the stairs. “Arlene, can you see me?” I asked.

“No,” she answered, staring right at me. “You’ve disappeared behind the fire.”

“For my next illusion,” I announced with my best stage magician’s voice, and stepped back through where the curtain had to be, “I pull something cool out of my hat.”

“Like a beer?” she asked, taking the last steps two at a time so we stood on the same level.

“No beer, but I do have a surprise.” She was curious, and I bent from the waist, gesturing through the curtain. She preceded me to the big surprise.

“Oh, no,” she said, “not another teleporter.”

We were both pretty worn-down by this point, but a new teleporter meant we had to make a decision. What we needed was a map to show us the location of all the frying pans and fires. “So should we bother with this one or not?”

She sighed. “We’d better try it, Fly. We’ve got to find a way off this moon, and this is pretty carefully hidden away. Let’s give it a shot, hon.”

“Who’s first this time?” I asked.

She hooked her arm in mine. “Let’s do it together again.”

Weapons out, we stepped aboard. With a flash of light, we zapped to a huge room shaped like the spokes of a wagon wheel.

Six hell-princes surrounded us.

Six monstrous mouths opened.

Six monstrous throats emitted guttural screams.

Twelve angry, red eyes burned at us in the dim light.

The hell-princes were not the only ones screaming.

Arlene and I screamed, too. This was a sight to make anyone howl at the moon. As the green fireballs began exploding all around us, we simply lost it—running around like chickens with their legs cut off, shooting wildly. There was nowhere to run, but we sure as hell tried!

“Duck!” we shouted at each other at about the same time. The balls of energy made fireworks over our heads. Our gunfire was nothing more than a quiet popping in that chaos, mild raindrops, but we kept firing, me with my shotgun and Arlene with her AB-

10.

I found a door by pure, random chance. Praying for a miracle, I hollered for Arlene and yanked the door open . . . and now I was surrounded by a dozen floating pumpkins! Frying pans and fires—definitely frying pans and pumpkins.

Arlene screamed something from the chamber with the hell-princes, but I couldn't hear her over my own screaming. This situation was fast becoming unacceptable.

There were too many pumpkins even to think about shooting; death, doom, and destruction from all directions! I ran as fast as I could . . . right back into the room with the hell-princes.

I wasn't thinking very clearly, but Arlene still had her head screwed on. Her hand snaked out and grabbed me. She'd stepped inside another of the spoke-chambers and now hauled me inside with her. I imagined wall-to-wall demons waiting for us, zombies stacked like cordwood to the ceiling, imp tartare .. . but inside, for the moment, was nothing but Arlene and Yours Truly.

She held a finger against her lips; I braced myself for the Bad Guys to come after us and imagined the absolute worst. A tidal wave of sound crashed on us—roaring, screaming, crashing. But all that came through that doorway was sound. The pumpkins and the hell-princes collided in a torrent of blood and vengeance.

There were so many monsters that they took a long time to die. At least fifteen minutes Arlene and I crouched in our little closet of safety as the pumpkins splattered themselves against the horned heads of the hell-princes. Blue balls of energy evaporated against lethal lightning bolts. Blood flowed thick on the floor. We stayed right where we were.

Finally, there was beautiful silence. We heard each other's breathing. "Who goes first?" Arlene whispered.

"What do you mean?"

"Who takes a peek?"

I raised my hand as if I were back in grade school.

Cautiously I poked my head outside the star-pointed hideaway. A single hell-prince remained on its feet. I pulled back inside our hideaway and reported.

"Then why isn't he at the doorway threatening to rip our lungs out?"

I looked past her. The hell-prince loomed in the doorway, waiting to ...

It looked like yesterday's lunch today. Arlene saw my face, followed my eyes and saw it.

I grabbed for my rocket launcher, but it was gone from the webbing—dropped in panic in one of the two rooms, of course!

Arlene pointed her AB-10. "That won't work," I shouted. A peashooter against the most powerful mon-ster we'd run into! Had she gone insane?

She pulled the trigger three times, and thrice the hammer clicked on an empty chamber.

She stared as the mauled, bloody beast staggered forward like Frankenstein's monster, clutching at her. Winding up like the Mud Hens' star pitcher, she heaved the gun into the minotaur's ugly face. Good God. I'm watching an old episode of Superman! I thought.

It blinked. The horned head shook slowly back and forth, left to right, as if trying to remember something.

Then it fell, straight as a toppling redwood, to the cold marble—dead.

"And I didn't even know he was sick," said Arlene. We both burst into hysterical laughter—stress released.

The floor was slippery with slick, tacky pumpkin juice, and we almost slipped several times. Clambering across the body of another hell-prince, Arlene pushed into the pumpkins' room and shouted, "You won't believe this!"

"What?" I was hunting for my good pal, Mr. Launcher.

"Get your butt in here! Um, please get your butt in here, Corporal." There it was! I snagged it and clambered after her.

The light was flickering, but I could see well enough. Crucified on the walls were the mutilated bodies of four hell-princes, with spidery trails of dried blood extending from their hands—if those hams with claws on the end could be called hands.

"Jesus, Mary, and Joseph! What the hell is going on here?" Blasphemy! chanted my memory-nuns. . . demons crucified in mockery of Our Lord.

The hell-princes were killed a long time ago; the dried blood told us that much. We made a circuit of the chamber and found plastic spheres with cracks so that they could swing open or close as easily. All the spheres were empty. . . but they were just the size

to hold pumpkins.

“Pumpkin nests,” said Arlene.

I stared awhile longer at the four crucified bodies of the minotaurs. “My God, it must have been the damned pumpkins themselves put the princes up there! They must hate them worse than they do us.”

It was a religious revelation for both of us. “No wonder it’s so easy to pit them against each other,” said Arlene in awe. “They despise and loathe each other so much, they proudly display each other’s ripped carcasses.” She looked up at me, face lighting up. “Jesus, Fly, we have a chance to win!”

I saw where she was headed. I had thought that the monster-aliens were simply so bad-tempered that when a zombie stumbled in the way of an imp fireball, or a demon took a bullet meant for one of us, they lost their concentration and turned on each other with mindless ferocity.

But “mindless ferocity” didn’t explain the cold, deliberate crucifixion of hell-princes by pumpkins, did it? Such a contemplative act required a deep, abiding animosity or hatred, and the single-minded determination to torture.

Something, the “mastermind,” held them together; but left to themselves, the natural inclination of each monster would be to hunt down all the other kinds and kill them.

The thought certainly suggested our tactic: kill the damned mastermind, and let nature take her course!

Now the only question was where in this hell that mastermind was.

We continued searching the pumpkin room. We found it stuffed with ammo, everything from rockets to shells to rounds for Arlene’s depleted AB-10; the various firefights had run us dry. After loading up, we pushed past one of the crucified hell-prince bodies and checked out the rest of the wagon wheel.

Not a creature was stirring, not even a zombie.

“Shall we teleport?” asked Arlene.

“After what happened the last time we teleported?”

“We going to spend the rest of our lives on this karmic wheel?”

“Apres vous, Bodhisattva.”

We teleported together. Appearing on a platform in a metallic room, we saw a door with blue trim that sure as shootin’ required a blue key card. Arlene went over and put her ear to it. “I hear what might be a lift operating; I guess we go thataway.”

“Key, key, who’s got the key?” I asked. “Another typical day on the job. Teleport. Get a key. Open a door. Find a teleport.”

Arlene smiled. “I guess we’re in a rut.”

-25

Nothing remarkable about this area, except one dark section that was just begging for a flashlight. I went up, cast a light, and saw twisty passages that suggested a maze. The light was curiously muted, dying out after only a few feet.

“You want to poke in here?” I whispered; whispering seemed appropriate.

“Um ... no. Maybe we don’t need to; and I don’t like the look of the place. It’s dark—not that I’m afraid of the dark!”

“Really? I sure am, especially recently. All right, it’s pitch-black, it’s a maze, and the ceilings are low and claustrophobic. Pass.” I mean, why? Life is short, especially on Deimos.

I was still staring into the blackness when gunshots yanked my attention back to Arlene. I raced down the hall and saw her pumping slugs into tiny, emaciated demons, so small I almost didn’t recognize them. “Look what I found!” she exclaimed, kicking the tiny bodies aside. Reaching behind their corpses, Arlene extracted a blue key card.

Tiny demons? I wondered . . . were they mutants? Failed experiments? Or did demons shrink when they starved? Other possibilities were more disturbing: Were these child demons? Were demons born or hatched, or created whole somewhere? I shuddered; whatever they were, they gave me the creeps more than their gigantic counterparts.

She sprang the door with the key card, and we went right through, smooth as you please . . . only to discover another door right behind it, this one requiring a yellow card! “Egah,” I bellowed, and by God I meant it!

An hour later we had traded a bunch of ammunition for a shiny, new, yellow key card.

Don’t ask.

We shuffled back to the mystery door, and Arlene inserted the card.

It slid. Revealing . . . Yet another door: red.

“You know,” I said, “there’s only one section of this whole place we’ve avoided.”

“The dark, mazy thing we passed? Fly, we don’t even know there’s a key card in there, or that if there is, it’s red.”

“Well... I shot a door open with a rocket once.”

“How many rockets we have?”

“Now? Six.”

“How many does it take to kill a hell-prince?”

“Usually six.”

Arlene sucked air through her teeth. “Maze,” she voted.

I understood her concern; if we used one or two rockets to open the last door, then encountered a minotaur on the other side, we’d be out of luck. I shrugged; maze it was.

As we entered the pitch-black corridor, our flashlights barely penetrated the darkness. “There must be some kind of neutralizing or damping field,” Arlene whispered behind me.

This bit was too close to that Jules Verne movie, where the members of the expedition get separated in the dark. I wasn’t going to let that happen to us.

“Fly—didn’t I see a pair of goggles of some sort back in the yellow-key room?”

“Did you? What of it?”

“Could they be light-amplification goggles?”

That sounded like a good excuse to get out of the dark.

Actually, anything sounded like a good excuse to get out of that dark maze; I had the creepy feeling that creatures were shadowing us ... creatures that didn’t need light-amp goggles.

We returned the way we had come, and sure enough, the goggles were there. Arlene was right: one pair. “Will these even work in the energy-sucking field?” I wondered.

Arlene shrugged. How else could we find out?

At the mouth of the maze we hesitated. Who was to wear them? We settled it scientifically: my vision was 20-40, barely good enough to avoid glasses; Arlene’s was 20-15, better than “perfect.” In other words, she got the goggles.

Besides, she was the girl. I don’t know why that occurred to me then; she seemed to get the goggles an awful lot.

She put them on and adjusted for ambient light, then led me back into the tunnel of darkness. I don’t even like haunted-house rides at amusement parks. “Oh, spit,” she said.

“Don’t give me any bad news.”

“Battery’s low.”

“I told you not to give me any bad news.”

“The goggles keep fading in and out.” She’d stopped walking forward and I bumped up against her again. “Or maybe it’s because of the field; but they’re lower power than the flashlights, and they do work .. . sort of.”

She started moving again, and dark as it was, I made believe I was her shadow, hand on her shoulder. “Tell me what you see.”

“Everything is green and fuzzy. It’s like looking at the world through a Coke bottle.”

About five minutes into the maze Arlene dived to the side, bowling me over. An exploding ball of energy lit up our surroundings for a fraction of a second; but all I saw was the back of Arlene’s head.

“Hell-prince!” she shouted. “Fly, use the launcher!”

“Can’t we run?”

“No,” she said, strangely insistent, “we’ve got to fight it!”

I unslung and waited, staring wide-eyed into the black.

“Where? Where is it?”

“I’ll guide you,” Arlene said, voice lower, more in control. Holding her shoulder so she wouldn’t be between me and my monster, I tried to aim the rocket launcher with the other hand. I couldn’t do it!

“Still—stand still, beside me,” she urged. “Right. Now listen . ..” Another lightning ball scorched the air, pounding the wall just above my head, and I dropped the damned weapon! She didn’t miss a beat. “It’s right at your feet, Fly. Bend down, pick it up.

“Why don’t you take it? You can see!”

“Fly, I don’t know how to shoot it—never checked out on it. Now shoulder it, damn you.”

“Aim me.” I was becoming impatient, but I knew she was working as fast as she could.

“Left, to the left, more, more; elevate . . . shoot now!” I squeezed the firing ring. The flare of the rockets lit up a cone of vision around us but I still couldn’t see the attacker. “Where is he? Where?”

“Never mind—you winged him, Fly! Glancing blow to the stomach, knocked him down.”

“Aim me again.”

The second shot scored a direct hit. Normally that wouldn’t stop a hell-prince. He’d only redouble his efforts. But this one must have gotten lazy in the maze, only encountering victims occasionally, and no resistance worth mentioning. Suddenly I realized we were facing a minotaur in something like its natural habitat.

Aim me—fire!—aim me ... I loaded my sixth and final round. “Where?”

Arlene waited a long time. “Fly . . . you knocked it to its butt in a chair thing with your last shot; it’s still breathing, but it’s not getting up.”

We waited; the situation remained static. “All right, kid,” I said. “I guess we’re officially clear.”

“And now I can officially tell you why we had to fight. Look at this—whoops, I mean feel this: a key card, though I have no idea what color; they all look green to me. That slime had it in its claws.”

“You mean it was there while I fired rockets at the hell-prince? I could have destroyed the key, too!”

“Well, that’s why I kept it a secret. Now aren’t you glad you saved those rockets?”

“I guess so,” I said, not bothering to point out that if we hadn’t gone into the maze at all, just used one or two rockets on the door, we’d be out of here by now, and richer in rockets, to boot.

We started trekking back, and with the unerring instinct such items have, the batteries chose that moment to burn out.

Arlene tipped me off with, “Damn it to hell!”

She pulled the goggles off and shoved them into her pocket. “God, Fly, I don’t want to die in the dark.” I thought she had a perfectly reasonable attitude. The idea of being caught and torn to shreds when you can’t even see to fight back didn’t appeal to me, either.

I had a vague idea of the way we must return. I took her hand and led her as fast as possible in that direction. Even found time to pray again. The nuns always knew the power of a dark room to inspire piety.

After all that, I really was in no mood for a damned imp waiting for us when we’d almost made it through the maze. It hissed, and we stopped cold ... we could hear it—but where was it? Hands shaking, I spun left and right with my scattergun, afraid to shoot lest I give away our own position. Or worse, hit Arlene!

“Jesus!” Arlene shouted, finding religion as a fireball careened over our heads. What a dolt—the imp, not Arlene; the fireball lit our surroundings, and in the glare I fixed Arlene and the imp. When the fireball faded, I shot where the imp was. Arlene didn’t kill time when she could kill a monster instead; she fired just as I did, and the imp was toast.

We were back in the light in short order. We returned to the three-door stack. I performed the honors of opening the last door, popping through, finding the lift, pressing the down button . . . and asking Arlene if she didn’t enjoy the music of screams and explosions behind us as the monsters took care of each other. They were running out of humans.

“This is a hell of an invasion,” she said.

“You can say that again.”

Deimos must have been listening and eager to confirm every prejudice we had. As the lift door slid open at the next level down, we found ourselves staring into the hugest, hairiest, foulest, and pinkest butt I’d ever seen.

One of the demons, Arlene's "pinkies," was standing with its backside up against the lift door. It hadn't even noticed that the door had opened. Cautiously, I raised a machine gun and Arlene raised a shotgun. We gritted our teeth against the noise and fired simultaneously. A Light Drop rectal suppository.

But on the other side of Demon One was Demon Two—and it did not take kindly to our prescription. This one charged like a hausfrau on speed in a megastore.

We hadn't been able to see it originally because its buddy had blocked the view. Now it dived through the door after us.

The big silly got itself stuck. We took our time blowing this one to oblivion at point-blank range. Oh, our bruised eardrums!

As Arlene wiped demon gunk out of her eyes, she took a gander at her clothes and asked, "Does this come out or is it like gravy?"

"Don't ask me. I was never much of a house husband."

Although we felt good about our most recent bout of carnage, we couldn't help but notice that we'd trapped ourselves between two demon bodies, each of which probably weighed over five hundred kilos; a half ton per baby. We'd have to climb out between them.

"How are you at mountain climbing?" she asked.

"How are you at spelunking?" I asked back.

She owned I was right; we didn't so much climb over the bodies as burrow our way through them. It took a bit of wriggling and writhing, and breath holding, but eventually even I made it.

The next problem consisted of some imps. Mighty monster slayers such as Arlene and myself could no longer be bothered with something so trivial as a few imps. We mopped up the floor with them on our way "I think we're getting a bit cocky," Arlene said.

"We earn the right to wear the haircut of our choosing," I shot back, and she laughed louder than ever before.

We entered a warehouse through an open door and around a couple of corners; this one was stacked wall-to-wall with pinkies, none as large as our elevator pals. They charged; having nowhere else to go, I leapt up, grabbed the edge of a huge box and hauled myself onto the top, then stretched out my hand for Arlene.

The way the demons screamed and growled and pounded on the box, you'd think they didn't appreciate initiative and quick thinking. They were so upset they made the box shake violently. I was afraid we might be thrown off, but by God, we hung on. Then we aimed, squeezed, and eventually the box stopped shaking. We didn't have any trouble getting down.

Now we had a moment to enjoy the new decor. The motif here was gleaming chrome and intricate, blued enamel. The appearance was rather sci-fi, actually ... utterly misplaced, considering the monsters inhabiting it. But then, I didn't subscribe to Better Homes and Demons.

Then we kicked the door at the far end—well, I kicked it—and found the spawning vats themselves.

Huge, metal containers they were, a heaping helping of pure evil; cisterns containing a weird, toxic-green junk, but not thick like the slime; inside each container was the body of a half-formed monster.

Arlene, on a whim of personal revulsion against the aliens, shot one of the partly formed torsos. The wound sealed up with a giant sucking sound, and the creature continued cooking. "How do you stop something like this?" she asked.

"I wish I knew. We can give up the hope of a finite number of the things. They must be genetically engineered soldiers. The alien mastermind, whoever or what-ever it is, must be stealing our nightmares and producing them wholesale."

"Uh, yeah. I wonder how long it takes for a vat to finish producing a newborn monster?"

Arlene held up her watch. Six minutes later the one she'd shot was finished, and none the worse for wear. She shot it again as it stumbled out of the vat. Again and again. Now the bullets worked. We repeated the experiment several more times at six minute intervals.

"The fluid is life-preserving as well as life-producing,"

I said. "But when a critter is born—"

"In other words," Arlene said, "we can't do abortion, but we sure as hell can nail 'em as newborns." She wrinkled her brow. "Let's do a rough calculation: at six minutes to cook a monster, that's ten creatures per hour per vat. Say sixty-four vats in the room, means 640 monsters per hour just from this one room. Christ! That's fifteen thousand per day."

"There, ah ... there could be scores of rooms."

“In a few days they could have an army of millions,”

Arlene said, finishing her number exercise.

“We still have one chance, Arlene. Find the alien mastermind and destroy it.”

“Yeah, that’s all we have to do,” she scoffed. “Piece of cake.”

-26

Too many, too many monsters, monsters, monsters,” I muttered.

“Monsters, monsters everywhere,” she echoed. “I don’t suppose it matters if there are any new types. We’re doomed no matter what.”

“Don’t say that, Arlene. We’ve been able to kill everything we’ve come up against so far. That matters. The weapons and ammunition give us a fighting chance.”

“Rats in a maze,” she said in a tone of voice new to her. She sounded defeated. I didn’t like that one bit. “You were right, Fly. Even if we always find enough ammo, it won’t save us. There are millions of them. They are testing us.”

They are!

At a moment like this I realized how important it was that we had each other. I’d experienced this same sense of defeat on Phobos, and for less cause. Now it was my turn to encourage the natural fighting spirit that burned so deeply in her.

“Then how we respond to this is part of the test, as well. We won’t defeat them by firepower. That’s only to buy us time so we can reason out a solution.”

She looked at me without blinking and asked, “Fly, what if there is no solution?”

“Don’t believe that!” I urged, and in so doing helped convince myself. “If they were unbeatable, they wouldn’t need to collect data on us.”

That took some of the shadows out of her dark mood.

“Don’t worry,” she said. “I won’t let you down.”

She’d been my buddy, my pal. We’d been careful not to confuse the issue by trying to be

lovers. But this was the right moment to take her in my arms, bring our faces close together and whisper, “It’s you and me. We’ll go to the end together. We’ll make them pay for everything.”

“Outstanding,” she said breathily, transforming the traditional Marine bravado into something very differ-ent. A moment passed between us that reminded me of the time we could have been lovers and chose buddies instead. Now I kissed her hard and she responded. We might not have another chance. And we weren’t going any farther than this; not in a place where we could so easily be reworked into dead meat, still on the hoof.

“I’m feeling better,” she said. “My brain is working again. You know, we’re in a good spot to do some damage.”

“Go on.”

“The bottom level of Deimos, directly below us, is one huge tank that was eventually going to be filled with liquid oxygen.”

“What the hell for?”

She flashed her sneaky smile. “You’ll love this. The UAC was thinking of using the entire moon of Deimos as a spaceship, too.”

“You’re kidding!” I said, but I could tell she wasn’t.

“The idea was to move it to the asteroid belt and use it for a mining base,” she said, finishing the news flash. “When I first realized we were moving, I thought some of us might be back in charge here. Then I suspected the more horrible possibility of a human-alien alliance.”

“Jesus, what a morbid imagination! How is it I never heard about this plan even in casual talk?”

“There’s secret, there’s top secret, and then there’s ‘rat us out and we’ll push you out the airlock.’”

“Point taken. If we’re going to find out what’s really going on, then, I think we need to go the same way as before. Down.”

We hunted through the level, but couldn’t find an exit, a secret door, anything. While we were searching, Arlene’s mood improved. That we were still alive was a miracle. Any monsters who tried to have us for lunch would get a bad case of indigestion. No matter

what we were up against, I was going to bet on human unpredictability. We hadn't spent a couple of billion years clawing to the top of the food chain for nothing.

"Fly, have you noticed how this section is shaped?" Actually, I hadn't. We'd been working our way along the inside of the wall in search of switches. "It's shaped like a skull," she said.

"These guys are running out of ideas," I answered.

"Those two pillars over there," she said, pointing, "are the eyes."

"Cute," I said. Less cute was the pumpkin that suddenly came out of nowhere and began firing at us. Arlene and I hadn't shot anything in whole minutes. We deflated the pumpkin; and this one acted more like a balloon with the air let out that any of its brothers, as it zigged and zagged on the way down.

We chased it beyond the two pillars, where we found its limp and leaking remains sitting like a cork on a narrow ladder-tube leading down. "At last," she said, "a guidepost."

"Just what the place needs," I concurred.

And now what? Should we still continue "down"? Or was it time to settle once and for all whether we were bugging out and reporting or going after the mastermind ourselves?

I stared at the tube. So far as I could tell, down was still the only way out. So far, our paths still coincided.

But there would come a time when one of us would have to prevail: either Arlene's romantic sense of duty to the entire human race, or my more practical duty to her as my buddy, as a Marine, and—all right, let's face it—and as a man to a woman.

We popped the "cork" and climbed down what seemed like two hundred meters, down into the heart of the lox tank. The climb was long enough to make us tired even if we weren't carrying all the crap that was necessary to keep us alive. By the time we reached bottom, my hands were aching and my right knee was acting up. I could imagine how Arlene was feeling from the way she tottered on her feet. I hurried over to catch her if she fell, but she recovered herself and made no comment.

We found a cozy room with four doors and a single switch in the center. "Do you hear that?" Arlene asked.

Until she mentioned it, I hadn't heard anything but our heavy breathing; but then I noticed something so unbelievably loud that a deaf man should have felt it;

concentration is a funny thing.

It sounded like the World Trade Center taking a stroll just outside.

We rotated slowly, tracking the noise, and I thought about that movie with the tyrannosaurus stomping around.

“Well, Fly, what now? I doubt we could climb back up again.”

I looked up; the hole we’d climbed through was far over our heads. “We already know there’s no way to get us out in that direction. We’re here; if an exit exists, it has to be through one of those doors.”

“Besides, we came here to do a job, Fly, even if that means fighting Godzilla.”

I shrugged; what else was there to say? “One switch; four doors. Which one does it open?”

I went to a door at random and tried to open it manually. Nothing. It wouldn’t budge, even when I kicked it. The behemoth still marched back and forth outside, shaking the entire building with every step.

“I can’t help it,” I said at last, “I’m a born lever-puller.”

“You’re repeating yourself,” Arlene repeated.

She flattened against the wall as I slapped the switch, then joined her. All four doors opened smoothly, simultaneously.

“Move out!” I shouted.

As fast as we could, we bolted through the door and entered a tiny, garagelike room looking into a brilliantly lit, silver and white, chrome-covered keep—the size of Texas. Wings from the central room extended like an X into the huge tank.

We slid outside on the double. The sound of the walking skyscraper inspired speed on our part—and that was without even bothering to look behind to see what was making all the ruckus.

Halfway to one of the wings, I couldn’t stand the suspense; like Mrs. Lot, I looked back.

I thought I’d seen everything. After imps and demons and pumpkins and hell-princes, I’d be able to handle anything else they threw at us! At least that’s what I thought.

I'd also thought the hell-princes were giants when I first saw them. My scale was in for a rude awakening.

"Mother Mary!" I shouted involuntarily. The others weren't monsters any longer, not compared to this!

It stood five meters tall, with piston-driven legs sup-porting a body that must have weighed hundreds of tons. Deep within its massive structure came the grinding of many gears. The arms were also piston-driven, and the left arm ended in a huge box that didn't look anything like a lunch box.

"No!" This time it was Arlene who had glanced behind and echoed my opinion. Now that we'd had our turn at making noise, it was time for the colossus to speak.

The scream of rage that came out of its mouth was so loud that it was as if the two long horns—one on each side of its head, and growing out so far as to end over the muscled shoulders—were actually 50,000-watt stereo speakers amplifying the sound so that everyone could hear it from Deimos to Phobos to Mars.

While it roared, the arm with the box on the end pointed at us. That broke the spell. We were both very good at noticing anything pointing at us.

We ran like hell itself was on our tail, up the left wing seconds ahead of a terrific detonation. A miniature cruise missile had missed us, impacting against the far wall. Even at a distance of two hundred meters, the explosion knocked us off our feet.

We ran as we'd never run before. All the eighteen-wheelers in the universe were coming at us on a down-grade to doom. We needed an exit ramp.

"Look!" Arlene screamed, pointing at a narrow hole where the wings joined the central building we'd just exited. She dived through without a hitch. Me, I got stuck—it was Phobos all over again! But I wasn't going to waste an opportunity, even with the wits scared out of me.

I turned and loosed a few rounds from my trusty rocket launcher. I figured, Why the hell not?

The rockets struck dead-on—with no apparent effect.

The titan roared; a good translation, I guess, would be,

"Now it's my turn!"

-27

The steam-driven demon returned fire, striking the wall of the wing, blowing us to the ground. The good news was that this finished the task of getting me through the hole.

We were so stunned, we could barely pick ourselves up from the floor; a floor that was shaking from the approaching leviathan. “Get up!” I said, grabbing Arlene by the arm and pulling her to her feet. The colossus stomped straight toward us, and I knew that a flimsy piece of wall would be like a piece of Kleenex to the thing even before he ripped through it without slowing down.

We staggered in the other direction, up the other wing, “My right foot’s numb!” Arlene hollered. “It’s asleep!” I heard the fear in her voice. I’m sure she could hear the fear in mine, too.

“Wake it up,” I said, and while she stomped her foot, forcing the blood to circulate, I fired a few more rockets at the monster. There was no effect worth mentioning.

“This thing won’t die!” Arlene shouted as we ran.

“Not without something heavier,” I agreed. Arlene stared at the far wall and started mumbling to herself, obviously making thumbnail calculations. I added one and one, and got two human beings crazy with terror.

As we rounded the corner of the next wing, we heard the steam-driven demon crunching after us. At least he wasn’t moving any faster than a brisk walk. At his size, if he didn’t tire, that walk would finish us. I didn’t want to think about the missiles he could fire. We turned another corner. So long as we heard him but didn’t see him, I figured we were doing our best.

“Fly!” Arlene cried. “Near as I can figure, this room is much larger than the Gate gravity field the aliens set up.” She took another deep breath, coughed, continued: “The periphery of the room should be at normal Deimos gravity.”

“Close to zero, you mean.”

“Yes.”

I froze, staring at the far wall. Something was nagging at the back of my brain. This was no time to ignore hunches, instincts, or sudden revelation. “Arlene, we’ve got to lure Godzilla out of the anomaly and into the normal gravity zone.”

She didn't ask why. She had a better question: "Which one of us?"

She was right. The only way to do this was for one of us to get into the zone and taunt the creature until it charged.

Arlene did some quick mind reading. "There's only one choice," she said. "I'm faster, you lumbering ox."

I couldn't argue with her about that. I was already a lot more winded than she. I used to kid her about having the fastest cleats in the Light Drop; now it was life or death riding on her foot speed. She must not have liked my expression. "Fly, it has to be me! Besides, you're a much better shot with the rockets."

"Lot of good that's done us."

"It's the only weapon might even slow it down," she insisted; and there was no arguing with logic. She stopped running and so did I. She put her hand on my cheek and it was warm and damp. We were both sweating like mad. "If I don't make it," she said, forcing her breathing to slow, and the words to come out slow and easy, "it's been a cool couple of years. Take care, Fly, and when you start firing those rockets, try not to mix me up with the big guy."

I wanted to say too much, so I only nodded and kept my mouth shut. She jogged toward the distant wall, looking back over her shoulder once. I felt like a heel, but she was right. Got sweat in my eyes, too.

Then the biggest monster in the universe rounded the edge and loped by. It walked right by me, sniffed the air with nauseating nostrils, and stopped! That unbelievable head slowly began to turn in my direction. I gave myself up for dead . . . but Arlene had other ideas.

She made so much noise she could have been a three-piece band. She caterwauled, taunted, laughed, pointed, howled and hooted, and tap-danced for a big finish. She passed the audition.

The big mother raised its missile arm. Arlene, back against the wall in the corner, planted her feet firmly and shoved off, like a kid shoving off in a pool to get a head start at a swim meet. Darn near zero-g could be fun.

She streaked sideways along the adjacent wall, and the missile impacted astern of her, pissing off the steam-demon.

"Roaaaarrrrrrrrrgggggggrrrrrraaaaaaaauuughghh," it complained, stomping after her. She

crouched, safe in a corner, watching every move the enemy made. When Godzilla stopped halfway and fired another three missiles, she was ready for it. She timed her leap to take her farther along the back wall, out of the blast radius.

As the demon pumped after her, I had a clear view from behind, and noticed that a whole rack of small missiles was built into the creature's back! What did that say about the thing's creators?

Then, one cannonball-crashing step past the invisible line did the trick, and the big guy launched into the air, smashing against the high ceiling. "Welcome to the gravity zone, sucker!" I yelled, then stepped out of cover and fired a barrage of rockets at a target that was just too damned big to miss. Hell, Lieutenant Weems could have hit this one.

The rockets exploded against the demon, knocking it farther back against the wall. This got its attention. Eyes big as dinner plates looked at me in an unkindly fashion. The demon raised its arm, but didn't fire. This was because it was slowly rotating in the air like a windmill. Good old zero-g!

Every time it lined me up for a shot, it had shifted again. And while it was unable to steady itself, I kept firing rockets. By the time it managed to stabilize itself and line up a shot, I had pumped a total of fifteen rockets. Fifteen, and it didn't give a spit!

Realizing that sooner or later the steam-demon might get off a missile in my direction, I made plans.

The essence of virtually every martial art—and they taught us a lot in the Light Drop Infantry—is to use the other guy's own weapons against him. Like, what the hell? What did I have to lose except my life, and all Earth?

I stood perfectly visible and stopped shooting; I wanted that titanic SOB to finally bring its missile launcher to bear. Sounds stupid, I know . . . but it really was all part of the plan.

I meant to do that!

Behind me the walls came to a point, and there was another hole in the wing just begging for me to fill her up. I waited until the steam-demon drew a bead on me ... then I dived into the slit as it fired. By the time the cruise missile impacted against the wing wall, I'd rolled on the other side of it, protected.

What happened next was in the hands of Sir Isaac Newton.

The force of the shot threw the demon backward against the wall with such terrific force

that five meters of solid monster was torn to shreds.

It sounded as if an entire supermarket had been slam-dunked into the side of a mountain. The next sound was music to my ears: Arlene giving a war cry of such glee and joy that I wanted to join her around some prehistoric campfire to gloat over the dead enemy and marvel at our own survival.

I still exercised some caution as I peeped around the wall. A few lights still flashed and flickered on the demon as it feebly tried to crawl. But this baby wasn't going to bother us anymore.

"Shall we put it out of our misery?" asked Arlene as she rejoined me.

"Does it deserve so merciful a fate?" I asked. She raised an eyebrow in surprise. Sometimes I think she underestimated my intelligence. What, only girl Marines can get away with sounding pompous?

"Best to play it safe," she said. "I don't want to get back on that merry-go-round."

I nodded. It only took the rest of my rockets, fired point-blank, to turn the prone body into cotton candy. "Whose turn is it to name the new monster?" I asked when the job was done.

"You saw it first," she said.

"All right, then: steam-demon. That's what I kept thinking when I watched it move."

"Not bad, Fly. You're getting better at this. Maybe you could be a writer."

"No need to be insulting," I said, patting her on the head in a patronizing way. This time I could get away with it. I felt good. It's not every day you trick an unstoppable force into an immovable object.

We explored and found a huge, round manhole in the floor near where the demon was originally standing. Perhaps it had been performing guard duty. Arlene did the inspection and laughed. "You're

going to love this," she said, standing up.

"Let me guess. It needs a key."

"You don't like having to mess with keys, do you?"

“Not when I’m fresh out of rockets.” But we had plenty of time for a scavenger hunt. Great. Whoever came up with the need for all these keys was on a par with the guy who invented cross-merging back on Earth. No torture too severe.

“I’ll bet I know where it is,” Arlene said. Following her lead, we returned to the still-sparking, burning body of the steam-demon. Arlene found a key stuck in a slot in the creature’s belly. So he had definitely been the guardian. She started to pull it out and quickly yanked her hand away, cussing.

“What’s the matter?”

“It’s freakin’ hot!” Being careful not to burn herself on the quickly slagging metal, she gingerly extracted it, shielding her eyes from the heat with her other hand. Wisps of steam rose off the purple computer key card, but it retained its shape. She grinned like a kid who’d just gotten the prize in the cereal box.

We ran to the door in the floor, the hole for a mole. Arlene plugged it into the slot. The hatch rose, then rotated open. Through this opening we saw a brilliant, eye-hurting red. A rickety, wooden ladder descended out of sight. “I can hardly believe it,” she said.

“Believe what?”

“Has to be, babe. Fly, we’re looking right at the wall of the hyperspace tunnel itself.”

We looked long and hard. “Now what?” she asked.

I shrugged. When there’s no data, flip a coin. After all, the ladder wasn’t even charred.

I reached my naked hand down into the red-red-redness. I touched a color. Arlene touched my shoulder.

“What does it feel like?” she asked.

I told her: “You’d think it would be hot, but it isn’t. It’s ice-cold.”

“Weird,” she said, and put her hand down next to mine. “So what’s outside a hyperspace wormhole?” she asked.

“Outer space?” I suggested. “That river of faces we saw earlier? Heaven and hell? Death?”

We glanced at each other and nodded. Holding hands, we took a deep breath and stepped into the redness.

Crimson red. Fire-engine red. Rose red. Blood-red. Lipstick red. Martian red. The color curled around us like cold, smothering, arctic water, filling our brains with the redness of death. We were on fire! But I felt no pain.

The experience was not pleasant. The flames burned away our clothing and weapons, but not our skin.

The ladder vanished; it was only in our minds, any-way. For a while we slipped and slid as if we were at a crazy amusement park; but at least we could see. No matter how bad a situation, I was always grateful for light.

-28

The red tunnel was bathed in the kind of hazy glow you get in a dark room when you're developing photos. So long as I could see my hand in front of my face, I wasn't going to freak. But that was the only good thing about the situation.

Then we fell into a room. Room? Some sort of internal organ . . . the walls, floor, and ceiling were pink, pulsating flesh, ribbed and liberally coated with slippery mucus.

Once again both Arlene and I were naked as jaybirds.

Instinctively, I covered myself again, just as I had before.

"Oh, come on, Fly!" Arlene complained. "You're a human being, thank God. We have little enough to remind us of who we are and why we're here ... we don't need you being shy on top of everything else."

I slowly took my hands away. But I tried not to look to hard at Arlene—I didn't trust myself. We were buddies; I wanted it to stay that way.

"This place stinks," Arlene said. Maybe my nose had stopped working. I counted myself lucky; the organ was diseased, sickly, and I was glad I couldn't smell it. There was a downward slope that wasn't so steep as to cause us to lose our footing altogether, but I wasn't comfortable as we stumbled through the giant organ. I had a disturbing sense of what organ it was ... a place we've all been before.

"I just had a bad thought, Fly; I hope whatever burned away our clothes didn't also burn away all the microbes in our guts that help us digest food. Without them, we'll die of starvation no matter how much we eat."

“I doubt it,” I said, my voice shaky, as if I hadn’t used it for decades. “I don’t feel ravenously hungry, so evidently the Gate left the MRE food in my stomach. Probably left the microbes, as well. . . anything organic.”

We both jumped when the demonic uterus started contracting. I had always hated amusement parks. Then we were sliding out of control. I grabbed Arlene’s hand and she squeezed hard.

The contractions pushed us along the floor to a “door,” a giant, semitransparent cyst membrane with a doorknob in the middle. The knob was made of some kind of cartilage. I pushed my arm into a wet opening all the way to the shoulder and turned the knob.

Two corpses were on the other side. They’d only been shadows seen through the membrane; we couldn’t tell what they were.

One was male, the other female. After our experience with deja vu, I experienced a momentary shock of thinking the bodies were our own! They weren’t, but they could have been related to us—similar body types, similar faces.

I sure as hell knew who they were, though: one was the third woman in Fox Company besides Dardier and Arlene, Midori Yoshida.

The man was Lieutenant Weems.

I felt a curious lack of emotion, looking at the pair.

They lay in an awkward position, head-to-head, each with a pistol in the other’s mouth. It was pretty clearly a suicide pact—I supposed because of finding themselves in hell.

Arlene leaned down to separate them, and we made a horrific discovery: they weren’t just lying tete-a-tete; their heads were joined together, fused at the crowns, the scalp flowing smoothly from one to the other. . . like Siamese twins joined at the head. The hair color faded continuously from blond (Weems) to black (Yoshida) without seam or break.

“Jesus and Mary,” I gasped.

“I don’t guess there’s any question why they blew their brains out,” Arlene whispered, dropping the bodies.

Arlene silently pointed to bloody imp prints all around the bodies. We both knew the shape of an imp footprint when we saw one. Judging from the depth of the heels, the bastards had been dancing around the bodies of their human victims. I spat at one of the

footprints. Arlene gripped my shoulder.

“Fly, please don’t think I’m a ghoul—but goddamn it, we need those pistols! And much as I like looking at your . . . your manly chest, I think we need the clothes, too. Definitely the boots.”

She had a point. A stomach-turning, revolting point; but still one against which I couldn’t argue.

We spent the next several minutes robbing the corpses and throwing up in the corner. But afterward we each had a pistol and twenty-six rounds.

To exit the room we had to squeeze through a narrow opening that looked exactly like . . . well, I didn’t like to even think about it.

I volunteered to go first, and she didn’t object. “Fly,” came her voice as we wriggled and writhed through the orifice, “do you ever get the feeling you’re being born again?”

I’m not a huge fan of morbid jokes; this time all I could do was shudder. “Arlene—maybe we shouldn’t be pissing off the only friend we’ve got down here by blasphemy.”

The moist, decaying walls pressed in around my shoulders, but I could still push through, and where I went it was easy for Arlene to follow. The thought crossed my mind that the passage might narrow so much that I’d become stuck. I wasn’t completely rational about this one.

I was so glad to pop out the other end that I barely minded the seven imps waiting on the other side. For one truly insane moment I wondered if that would make Arlene Snow White! Then I was busy again, doing my job. Arlene was right behind me, doing her job. We only had a brace of pistols. The sons of bitches didn’t stand a chance.

As was the usual case after a good killing, we took advantage of the opportunity to do more sightseeing. Not once did I regret that neither of us had thought to bring a camera. “So this is hell,” Arlene said.

“What they want us to think of as the infernal regions,” I replied. Hell was made of fleshy walls, an open field whose ground was a mottled scalp with comically giant, prickly hairs growing out of randomly scattered tufts, rivers of fire, a black and red swirling sky . . . and air that stank of urine, decayed flowers, and bitter lemons. There may have been a hint of old cat boxes mixed in there as well. “Come to think of it,” I continued, “not a bad try.”

“One of their more creative efforts.”

We saw a single door, sagging with moldy, rotten timbers. The stonework lintel was crumbling. Arlene strolled to the unpromising portal and made a close inspection. “Fly, come look at this.”

I went, but my stomach wished I hadn’t. There were mites or larvae eating away at the stone, the wood, the fleshy walls, everything! “Quite an attention to detail,” Arlene said as if evaluating an artwork.

The next moment she stopped being an art critic. A cloud of the tiny creatures came off into the air as if we’d pounded on the door, but neither of us had touched anything. They settled on her. More followed and they settled on me. Holding up my hand, I could see dozens of little specks spreading across my flesh . . . and there was a very slight itch.

“Damn it, get off’n me!” Arlene shook her arms wildly, but enjoyed no more success than I. We ran, rolled, and still the little vermin hung on. They were worse than lint.

“Ah, the hell with it,” I said. “They don’t seem to be killing us. First chance, we’ll take a bath.”

“Or go through a teleporter,” she said.

“Being living organisms, they would probably go through with us. No, we’ll look for water.”

“Or flea dip.” She probably had a very good idea there.

But her voice cracked; she held on by main force.

“Can’t stand here forever,” I said. “Let’s pop it.”

I cracked the seal. Surprise! A pair of larger than life pumpkins floated out. At least they weren’t going to crawl around on our skin. They were up high enough that we ducked and managed to avoid being seen. They sailed past, looking for hoops and nets.

The pumpkins saw the dead imps and floated over to investigate, providing us with the opportunity of darting through the doorway. Inside we found a single shotgun and a few shells. Arlene picked it up and tossed it to me.

I was touched. We soldiered on.

To the left we saw a rickety, wooden walkway over a pool of boiling, red stuff that seemed to be a cross between lava and the traditional green toxin. Annoying-ly, it was the only way to go. As we began to cross cautiously, the path started to give way. For

some reason, neither of us was the least bit surprised.

There was nowhere to go but forward before the pathetic bridge collapsed into the evil fluid below. We ran like hell. But at the end we were blocked by what appeared to be a solid stone wall.

I threw myself at the wall, hoping to grab a handful, and Arlene could grab me. Instead, we ended up very much alive on the other side of the illusion. There was no wall.

If we were startled by the turn of events, the imps we had landed on were downright stunned. The shotgun lost its virginity then and there. Arlene took care of a few stragglers with her 10mm.

This time, when we lifted our eyes from the carnage of the moment we were in for a real surprise. Right in front of us was the figure of a human being wrapped in something sticky and suspended from the ceiling by his feet.

We could tell by his clothing that he was a UAC civilian. We could tell from his groans that he was alive.

He was tall, nearly two meters. He was overweight and suffering a lot more because of it, the stomach hanging at a painful angle, his belt about to come loose. Blood trickled down his wrists from where he had tried to free himself.

“God, he’s still kicking,” Arlene said, focusing on the only important thing.

I looked close; the man appeared to be wrapped up in spiderwebs; the web suspending him from the ceiling was thick and didn’t look like we could easily break it.

“Is there a knife anywhere?” We pulled UAC boxes over and rummaged through them; no knife, but a bottle would break to serve the purpose. Arlene sliced, and I cushioned his fall as he came down, grunting at the weight. Good thing there were some medical supplies in the UAC boxes; the man was in shock. Arlene pushed some D5W saline to pump up the volume; after a while his eyes opened. He stared at us without comprehension. I expected that.

“Can you hear me?” I asked, and got nothing. “If you understand me, nod your head.”

That took a moment but he finally nodded. Arlene massaged his neck and I held a finger in front of him until he focused on it. “Are you all right?” Arlene asked him at last.

“Unh,” he grunted in a low, husky voice, carrying all the pain.

“Who are you?” I asked.

“Bill Ritch,” he said, groggily.

“How long were you up there?” Arlene asked.

Further proof that life was coming back into him was the way he shuddered. “Long enough that I thought I’d died.”

“Who put you up?” I asked.

“The—goblin,” he answered. “Spidermind.”

Oh, great; a whole new nomenclature. That narrowed it down to any of the monsters. If we ever reported to Earth, We would need to settle on a common terminology.

“Congratulations,” said Arlene.

“For what?” he asked, half turning to her, still dizzy.

“Surviving.” It was a big deal finding another human who could move and wasn’t a damned zombie! We would have opened a bottle of champagne and celebrated if we’d had the time ... or the booze. As it was, Ritch was stunned to receive a mouthful of cold water, if still a bit confused.

Following a corridor that looped around, we wound up back at the same damned central entrance. I would never enjoy an amusement park again. Peeking cautiously around the corner, I saw we had company, tired of inspecting the dead imps outside. Pumpkins in the air, pumpkins everywhere . . .

They roared in frustration and shot their nasty little balls of electricity at each other. Important datum: pumpkins are immune to their own weapons. And I made a note to see how they responded to being baked in a pie.

“Were those the goblins you meant?” Arlene whispered to Ritch. He shook his head, but his grim expression left no doubt that he’d encountered pumpkins before.

“They’re so freaking stupid,” said Arlene contemptuously.

“You’d think something that was all head would have more brains,” I added.

The next step was obvious for those of us with brains. We dashed across the corridor to another closed door. I opened it a crack while Arlene kept watch, making sure the

pumpkins didn't float back. Ritch obviously hadn't received military training, but he caught on fast. Considering what he'd been through, he was a quick study. He kept pace, which was all we really needed from him at the moment.

Through the door I saw two pumpkins on the inside as well, hanging with a bunch of imps. Taking a deep breath, I waited until a mob of spinys marched between the door and the nearest pumpkin. Then I stepped out and fired five or six unaimed rounds. These guys didn't merit any wasted shotgun shells. Having done my dam-age, I popped back and braced the door. Arlene and Ritch helped.

One thing you can say about pumpkins: they don't let a little obstacle like imps stand between them and a target.

And one thing you can say about imps: they don't like being shot by balls of electricity.

We left them to each other's mercies. Over the sound of carnage, Ritch shouted at me. "How'd you get them fighting each other?"

"We do it all the time," said Arlene, smiling. "It's the Iago tactic."

"I'm impressed."

I watched for the two in the hall; but they'd gotten tired of shooting each other and returned to shoot the imp carcasses.

When the sounds behind the door died down, I slowly cracked it. I saw a lot of dead imps on the floor and the remains of one deflated pumpkin on top. I assumed the other one must be on the bottom of the pile. That's when I made a huge mistake.

-29

Stepping inside, I didn't think to look behind the door, straight up, the logical place for a surviving pumpkin to be waiting in ambush. And that's exactly where the bastard was.

"Fly!" Arlene shouted. She was paying attention. She never used that tone of voice except when it was life and death—and in this case, the issue was my life. I threw myself on the floor just as a lightning ball fried the tip of my scalp. A run of 10mm rounds got my attention.

I flipped over to see Arlene blasting away, then scram-bled to my feet and pumped my shotgun at the floating head. She split left and I right, and we kept firing.

When we were done, that was the deadest pumpkin I had ever seen still floating. It was almost like one of those old cartoons where the character hangs in space for several seconds before it remembers the law of gravity, then quickly plummets to the ground. All that was missing were the sound effects.

“Incoming!” yelled Ritch, outside the door. We hadn’t forgotten the other pumpkins. We’d hoped they might have forgotten us, though.

“Get in!” Arlene yelled, pulling at Ritch’s sleeve. He didn’t need another hint. The moment he joined us, we slammed the door shut and jammed the latch with Arlene’s pistol. The latch immediately rattled; God only knew what the pumpkins were using for hands.

“Look,” Ritch said, pointing. Protruding from under a dead imp were the pieces of a box of shotgun shells, along with shells.

“They may be covering all kinds of supplies,” I said. The prospect didn’t appeal to me, but I thought I should set a good example. Getting on my knees, I pulled the corpse away from the box, and dozens of shells went rolling as Arlene and Ritch collected them.

Then we all got busy moving the dead monsters and stacking them in one corner. We received our just reward. There was another functional shotgun, lots of ammo, even tools: hammers, nails, even a gas-powered chain saw. Maybe the zombies had been used to build condos for imps and pumpkins. We even found an antique revolver for Ritch; I wondered which one of us the civilian would accidentally shoot.

We replaced the pistol in the latch with a handful of nails, then collected all the tools and put them in a neat pile for later use. Weapons and ammo in hand, we explored the room and found it led to a broader plaza area. Then we found a door leading into a narrow corridor.

“I’ll go first,” I said.

“Fine with me,” said Arlene. Ritch was more than happy to bring up the rear.

No good deed goes unpunished. I realized that the moment I heard the familiar pig-grunting noises, the ugly snuffling that always turned my stomach and might keep me from ever eating bacon again. They didn’t make us wait very long. The demons came storming down the corridor, pale pink flesh with claws and lots and lots of teeth.

Somehow, though, after the steam-demon, I couldn’t take the pinkies seriously.

The narrowness of the corridor meant I had taken point with a vengeance; no one could shoot past me. I loosed a shotgun blast. “Fall back!” I shouted, and heard Arlene and Ritch doing it. Taking steps backward, I never took my eyes off the enemy. I shot a second time, then a third and fourth time, before dropping the first demon.

I didn’t like the arithmetic. Despite our extra ammo, there were more demons than we could take down at this rate. My comrades had made it back through the door as I held the corridor. Back to the wall, I kept firing, when suddenly . . .

“Hold fire!” It was Arlene’s voice, and I couldn’t imagine that she’d gone nuts. I risked turning my head. She stood in the doorway, holding the chain saw. Then with a chugga-mmmmmm, chuggga-mmmmmm, she pulled the cord. Third time was the charm, and it kicked to life with an honest roar to drown out all but a steam-demon’s scream.

Elbowing past me, she lifted the buzzing blade and let the teeth bite into the nearest demon. “Die, Pinkie, die!” she screamed. It sounded odd, but the results were great: red blood splashed us both, and she kept at it, screaming a war cry that just might scare a fallen angel.

Arlene waded through them, working the saw, beads of sweat and drops of blood covering her face. A demon arm fell to the floor, blood exploding in a torrent. She slipped on the gore, but the movement carried her forward and the saw buried itself in the chest of the next demon, ripping a death gurgle from the creature.

I tried to get to her to help, but the demon corpses were in the way. She worked the chain saw loose but fell backward, swinging it in a wide arc. A large demon swung its claw down hard and knocked the chain saw out of her hand.

Before Arlene could get away, another claw ripped her open. She didn’t scream but fell silently.

The sight drove me mad. Somewhere in the back of my mind I’d accepted the likelihood of our being blown to bits; but I wouldn’t have us die like animals!

Picking up the saw, I revved it and finished the damned job, shoving the blade into the face of the one who had hurt her. I lost count of how many were left but I kept at it, swinging the chain saw back and forth, covering the walls with gore. Finally, there was nothing left to kill.

The red haze lifted and I remembered Arlene. Turning back, I saw that Ritch was with her, trying to stanch the bleeding with improvised first-aid. My right sleeve was already in tatters, so it was a simple matter to rip off a strip of cloth and use it for bandages. We patched her up as best we could.

Her face was pale and she was weak; but she was alive.

“Can you move?” I asked.

“Move or die,” she wheezed, “so I’ll move.” We helped her stand up. I started to pick up her shotgun and pass it to Ritch, but she shook her head. “That’s mine,” she said, reclaiming it proudly. I wasn’t about to argue.

We left the heavy chain saw on the deck and staggered forward into a last chamber. There were disgusting things lying around, but as nothing was moving or alive, I gave it no further attention. In the center of the room was a teleport pad of rusted metal, designed in a heavy and cumbersome manner. It looked like an antique.

“That doesn’t look promising,” I said.

“We have no choice,” Arlene answered through clenched teeth. We hadn’t had a good choice in a long, long time. All three of us stepped aboard, arms linked. Ritch must have been religious. He said a prayer.

Maybe because it was an old-fashioned teleporter, the experience was different from the others . . . like the special F/X were provided by a different company. I noticed sounds that were new, a wind tunnel combined with an avalanche; and there was the sensation of falling turning into floating. Then we arrived.

“Wow!” Ritch said. He wasn’t as used to this stuff as we were. The terminus was a rock garden. Although the light was dim, we could make out the twisted, curved, and warped rocks that made me think of a giant coral reef, except the color and texture of the formations was the same as desert camo. Met our old friends, the zombies.

Arlene fired first. The opportunity to fight put life back in her again. Most of these zombies weren’t armed—ex-UAC civvies—which was fine with me. Ritch got off a couple of shots as well; I don’t know if he hit anything. Abruptly, I realized we had a more serious problem than the walking dead crew. I’d almost forgotten the real spooks —the ghost things I thought of as specters.

One touched my face with all the coldness of space. I hit at the horror wildly but struck Ritch instead, knock-ing him to the ground. It was joined by some of its buddies, those flying metal skulls I hoped never to see again. They dive-bombed us like kamikaze pilots.

Then Ritch found the back of a specter head by swinging his hands; he put his revolver against its skull and squeezed off a point-blank round.

That got the critter's attention; it spun to deal with Ritch, turning its back on me; I blew its head apart with the riot gun.

Somehow the idea of a ghost you can slice and dice appealed to me. I didn't think the nuns would approve. The damned specter went down screaming like a banshee and bleeding something that stank of ice-cold grave-yards.

While I was auditioning for Ghost Busters, Arlene popped the flying skulls. They didn't require as much firepower as the pumpkins. Ritch took care of the remaining zombies.

"Aim for the head, just like the movie," Arlene shouted.

He was doing okay for a novice, and naturally gravitated to the easiest job; but he acquitted himself well. I was happy we had found him.

Finally the wave of bad guys subsided and we could play beachcombers. There wasn't much worth grabbing this time, however—only a bit of ammo and a Sig-Cow for Ritch from the poorly equipped zombies.

Now seemed a good moment to find out more about Bill. Arlene thought his "goblin" might be a hell-prince and described one, but he shook his head. "Not a minotaur; it was more like a giant spider," he said.

"Oh, great," said Arlene, "a new one for the files."

We found out Bill Ritch was a computer programmer.

If we found any monsters with laptops, he would prove invaluable. To be fair, he'd done fine killing his quota of zombies.

"How'd you get captured in the first place?" Arlene asked.

Ritch sighed. "Classic case of 'this can't really be happening to us.' When we were—" He stopped, face turning red. When he started up again, I knew he had skipped something important. Later, I thought. "We were studying the Gates, and suddenly one of them on Deimos experienced a marked drop in temperature. It started glowing, too."

"But I thought Deimos was deserted when all this started," I interrupted.

"You were supposed to think that," he said. "When the UAC found alien electronics and started—then we all crowded in to see, and that's when they started coming through, the goblins. Aliens, I mean."

“Which ones?” I asked. “Which ones came first?”

“The first thing through was one of those things you call an imp. It looked at us and grinned, and we were all frozen in total shock. We didn’t know what to say or do—our first contact with an alien race, and we were speechless! All those wonderful plans about what we were going to say and how we were going to react—”

“Well, how did the imp react?” Arlene was always good at cutting through the plastic to get to the meat.

Ritch shook his head sadly, remembering something painful. “It threw one of those wads of phosphorous mucoid and killed a senior scientist and two Air Force captains. I was in the back. . . thank God. A woman screamed; I think it was Dr. Tyya Graf. Then another one came through, and we panicked.”

“Mob scene?”

“Like Soylent Green.” Arlene mm-hmmed, but I was confused. Must have been another old movie reference. “If I hadn’t been such a big guy, I would have been trampled. As it was, I was knocked down. I tried to get up, and they squirted some sort of webbing around me, a neurotoxin that paralyzed me.

“I was out of it for some indeterminate time; when I came to, this spider thing was interrogating me and I was in a huge room, surrounded by hundreds of goblins of different types, and even some of those zombies. I recognized Dr. Graf, but I could tell right away she was dead and her body was just reanimated. And, well, that’s the story.”

Speaking of which, Arlene interrupted with her own thoughts: “Fly, do you notice there’s a lot more zombie bodies here than anything else?”

“Sure.”

“So with all the noise we just made, why didn’t a lot more come running?”

“Curiosity may have killed the cat,” I said, feeling flip, “but never a zombie. Or maybe this is all of them.”

“No brains,” said Ritch, bending over one of them.

Arlene shook her head. “I think it’s because they never do anything they’re not told,” she said. “They must stay in constant communication with someone or something, and only go investigate when they receive a command. If they’ve been told to patrol, looking for humans, then they’ll attack; otherwise, they might march right by us and not even

see us."

"That imp who talked to me made me wonder if imps give them orders," I said.

"Maybe; but we've seen zombies where there are no imps. Maybe they get standing orders. I saw a bunch of imps come running to check out a situation once where all I'd done was get the zombies firing at each other. The imps couldn't control them."

"Well, the pig-snuffling demons don't have any intelligence worth mentioning, either," I said. "If there's any more of them around, they wouldn't hear a battle over their own breathing."

"The skulls don't even have ears," Arlene said. "Look, it's either hell-princes, the steam-demons, or that thing Bill described, the spider thing."

"The spider creature that interrogated me," Ritch said, shuddering.

"We'll keep that in mind." Time to move on. Hugging the right wall, we discovered a narrowing, "natural" corridor with more shotgun shells lying on the floor like popcorn. We scooped them up, but I was disappointed to discover that some were defective or spent. I was preoccupied with a handful of questionable-looking specimens when they spilled through my fingers and I dropped to my knees to recover them. That saved my life. A shotgun blast filled the space where my head had been a moment before.

"Zombie!" Ritch called out anti-anticlimactically. No one ever shot at us with human weapons except former humans. Another shot missed high, but there was no third attempt on Yours Truly.

Arlene turned to fire—and froze! "F-Fly . . ." she whispered hoarsely.

I stared. Jesus; it was Arlene's worst nightmare come true. Wilhelm Dodd, or what was left of him, lurched toward our little group, shifting his twelve-gauge to get a better shot.

-30

Arlene stared at him approaching, her mouth open, face pale as a ghost. I didn't want to do it, but she'd made me promise!

Feeling sick, I raised my own weapon. I knew what would happen: I would blow the f'ing SOB away—and Arlene would hate me for the rest of her natural life . . . which might not be a very long time at that.

Then a miracle happened.

Just as my finger tightened on the trigger, Arlene's face suddenly hardened. The color returned. She closed her mouth.

Then she pumped a shell into the receiver, shouldered her riot gun, and blew the zombie-Dodd's face off.

Nobody said anything; Ritch took his cue from our awkward silence. I put my hand on Arlene's shoulder, and she spoke. Her voice croaked like a rusty can tied behind a very old car. "He was already gone, Fly. And I didn't want him to come between my buddy and me."

There was that damned peculiar lump again. I blinked

—dust in my eye, I guess—and squeezed her shoulder so hard she winced. But she didn't move to push my hand away.

She knew what would happen if I were the one to kill the reworked Wilhelm Dodd . . . and she wouldn't allow that to happen.

Evidently, our friendship was as important to her as it was to me.

I'd forgotten that the zombies had ever been human; I made myself forget. But the staring face of Willy Dodd wouldn't let me get away with it any longer. He was a man, a Marine, and very important in my life. Now that he was gone—I didn't know what to think about Arlene and me.

Best not to think at all, I advised me; it was good advice, and I took it.

Arlene was taking it hard. Sitting on the floor, she put her head between her legs and took a series of long, deep breaths. I wanted to comfort her but felt helpless. "Arlene ..." I reached out to touch her. She shook her head and pulled away. Any other situation, I would have left her alone to mourn in private. But there was no privacy on Deimos except the solitude of the grave.

Ritch understood what was going on and kept his mouth shut. I liked him more and more. I glanced at my wristwatch, a pointless act in this place, perhaps; but it helped somehow: a tiny act of useless normalcy.

"Arlene," I said, gently as I could, "we've got to split.

You need to pull it together."

“Leave me alone!” she said, keeping her face turned away. “Don’t look at me.”

This didn’t seem like a good time to push the envelope. I’d never seen her this badly shaken; without another word, I sat down, back-to-back with her, and kept watch while she got it out of her system. Ritch stood a little farther up the hallway, gun out, eyes averted.

Every so often her entire body shuddered; I pretended not to notice. When she finished, she wiped her eyes and stood up. “Let’s move, Corporal,” she said. She was a PFC and I outranked her, but it was all right. The fighting tone of voice was back.

Ritch rejoined us and we pushed on. Up the defile was a rise where we could peek over the rock wall to our left. The architect from hell had been busy again. A huge garden stretched out before us in the shape of a right hand. We were in the thumb.

“Can you believe this one?” Arlene asked.

“Better than a swastika,” I said. The hand covered a good piece of territory, with the “fingers” wide spread, each undoubtedly offering a wide selection of motion sensors and other surprises. The “ring” finger had a bizarre, wooden shack right where the ring would have been; I wondered if the “pinkie” finger would be full of Arlene’s demons.

We started with the thumb. “Bet the only prints we find are foot-prints,” Ritch said. I’ve never liked stupid jokes, either, but Arlene laughed; anything to shake her out of her depression.

I heard a familiar bubbling: the red “lava” liquid. The pool was in a raised, stone structure that could pass as the swimming pool from hell. I thought I saw a switch just below the lava line.

“What’s that?” Ritch asked.

“Toxic yecch,” Arlene answered. “Haven’t you seen it before?” Ritch shook his head. “You’ve been lucky,” she went on. “Fly and I have been through an ocean of the stuff.”

“Looks like lava,” Ritch said, proving an old adage about great minds and small circles. “Is it hot?”

“Not enough,” I said, “but it can still kill you.” The switch teased me, like a piece of plastic sticking up from a bowl of red oatmeal.

“You know,” I mused, “that switch is awfully tempting...” I found a rock and pitched it at the button, jumping back. I didn’t want any of that spit splashing on me.

I should have tried out for the majors when the twelve-year strike began. First try was the charm; we heard a loud click, and a door rotated open, revealing our latest take-home pay: another AB-10, and far more important, a pair of beautiful Medikits. I would have preferred another of those magical blue health spheres, but this would definitely do in a pinch.

But my heart sunk when I picked up the first one and saw the telltale signs of imp. This was not a virgin find. Tooth marks explained why most of the drugs were missing. Apparently the imps liked the taste. A hurried investigation of the kits showed that barely enough drugs had survived for Arlene.

Ritch helped me gather together what we needed. After cleansing her wounds, with special care for the bad gash in her chest, I gave her painkillers and put on fresh bandages. Ritch seemed embarrassed, swabbing at her amble, naked breasts; but titillation was the last thing on any of our minds.

“How’s that?” I asked.

“Better,” she said, but I could tell from her strained voice and pale face that she was far from perfect. Better would have to do.

The dregs of the drugs proved a bonus for Ritch. He didn’t look so hot, either. Coming down from the ceiling and snapping out of shock so quickly couldn’t be good for anyone, and he’d been holding his own in combat instead of resting.

I wish I could have offered him a needle of the stimulant I’d used back in the marble room, on Deimos; but stimulant seemed to have been what the imps were after—the vials were all empty.

Leaving the thumb, we descended on the palm as if storming heaven and began a serious housecleaning, sliding from rock to rock, blasting anything in our way . . . and scooping up anything useful. The opposition was feeble, hardly worth mentioning except to say that they died quickly.

Arlene lucked into finding a rocket launcher of her very own. Then we helped her locate the little battery-sized rockets that were nearby. She collected seven of the little darlings, and I showed her where to stick them and taught her the forbidden lore of proximity fuses and firing rings.

We were so happy about the find that we must have sent out a subverbal signal. Monsters don’t like humans being happy.

We were ambushed by six former comrades at arms and ex-UAC workers, four imps,

three demons, two flying skulls, and a partridge in a pear tree. (I'm lying about the pear tree.) In the ensuing carnage, Arlene used up every rocket; but at least she could never again say she hadn't been checked out on the launcher.

Arlene and I barely worked up a sweat. Ritch was getting good at the game; he was a good draft pick. He'd been doing some thinking that he was eager to share with us. Arlene still seemed numb from the discovery of Wilhelm, but I was ready to get to know this new Ritch better.

So, as we surveyed our latest gaggle of ex's, I encouraged him to speak his piece.

He'd already told us that computers were his area, but he'd been overly modest. Evidently, he was a bona-fide computer genius kidnapped from Deimos by the aliens.

"We had already decided that the Gates were hypermass transportation devices; if they really worked and weren't just some elaborate failed experiment from millennia past, it would blow every physics theory we had out the wash.

"We discovered they responded to bursts of high-energy microwaves; their circuits responded for several seconds after each burst—not electronics, exactly, but something involving direct manipulations of particle streams."

As Ritch held court, Arlene perked up and started paying attention. She was getting that expression she wore when a boyfriend betrayed her. Suddenly, her mouth dropped. "You mean you—activated the Gates yourselves? You turned them on? Jesus Christ, you brought those things here!"

Arlene had a romantic side that tried to believe whatever nonsense officials put out as the truth du jour. I'd gotten over that sort of silliness long before I joined the Corps—it wasn't a long-term healthy attitude for a jarhead.

"I... I think we brought these aliens through the Gate ourselves, in a way," Ritch admitted pathetically. "But it was an accident!"

"Ah, an accident," I snorted. "Well, that certainly relieves everyone of any personal responsibility."

Ritch continued, not noticing the irony. "I think, now, that whatever these creatures were, they were listening to the Gates. Maybe they were trying to fire it up from their end, and until we 'answered the phone,' they couldn't do it. But yeah, I guess we let them in.

"Anyway, I don't believe these are the creatures that built the Gates."

“That’s what we figured,” I said. “You got anything more substantial than a gut feeling?”

“The UAC has . . . engravings that the Gate builders left behind. They are as old as the Gates, showing what the Gate builders looked like.” He paused, trying to find the right words.

“And?” we asked as one.

“You’re not going to believe this—” he started.

“After what we’ve been through, we’ll believe anything,” I said, launching a pre-emptive strike.

“Well, they look like something out of H. P.

Lovecraft,” he said.

“I knew it,” Arlene said. She still looked furious.

“Am I the only person in the solar system who never read this guy?” I asked, irritated. “The first one of you to talk about anything ‘eldritch’ is going to get a rocket right between the eyes.”

Ritch looked at me like he thought I might be serious, but a big smile from Arlene put him at ease. He swallowed hard and said, “They have snakelike trunks with multilimbed upper torsos, no visible head; and they’d have to move like sidewinders.”

“How big?” Arlene wanted to know.

“Up to ten meters long,” he answered. They didn’t say it but I just know they were both thinking, Oooh, eldritch!

I agreed. “I’d bet my life we haven’t met the real intelligence behind this.”

Arlene joined in: “Bet something of more value than that, Fly. What value do you think an insurance company would put on us?”

“I don’t gamble,” Ritch said with a straight face, “and I have met the—what’d you call it? The mastermind. That spider thing . . . it’s in charge, I’m positive.”

“Tell us more,” I requested.

He shuddered. I knew how he felt. Theory was one thing, close contact another. “So far as I can tell, the spider thing has real intelligence,” he said. “It spoke in clear English.” I wasn’t about to doubt him after my experience with the imp back on Phobos.

“What did it say?” asked Arlene.

“Well, first it started asking me questions. It started with simple, yes-no, true-false; I tried to lie a few times, but it already knew a lot, and I got caught.”

“What was its response to a lie?”

Ritch shrugged. “Didn’t seem to care emotionally; but it punished me. Horrible stuff, but all hallucination. You know how you’re having a dream, and you dream that you’re absolutely terrified? The spidermind thing can do that: I can see why people who encountered one of those, maybe thousands of years ago, could think they’d died and gone to hell.” He shuddered at the memory.

“But the fears were all unreal. And after a while I realized I could take it. You just have to accept being afraid like you’ve never been afraid before; but if it can’t break you with fear, it doesn’t know what

to do next.”

“What did it do to you?”

“It started ordering me to reprogram all the Phobos and Deimos equipment. When I refused, it tortured me with more and more Fear Itself, which is what I started calling the hallucinations. When that didn’t work, it hung me from the ceiling with its webbing, like it was saving me for later.”

“I got the impression it needed to find out more about humans so it could figure out how to crack us. Meanwhile, I think it went looking for a more cooperative programmer. I’m sure it would have killed me when it found one.”

“To find out more about humans,” I repeated, feeling a chill. “Arlene ... do you think all this crap that’s been thrown against us ... ?”

She glared at me, then glared at the deck. She knew what I meant; she knew it made sense.

We had been the secondary information sources. Had we given the mastermind anything useful? Mater Dei, I hoped not.

“Describe the monster,” Arlene said.

Ritch gritted his teeth. “It’s like a huge, brainlike thing inside a mechanical, spiderlike body.”

“What about the weapons?” I asked.

“Ringed with more weapons than you can imagine,”

Ritch said. I doubted that. I’d reached the point where I could imagine quite a lot.

Actually I was glad to receive Ritch’s news. A leader alien meant we had something to really fight. I was exhausted cutting off the inexhaustible limbs of this army. I was ready for a general. The new information cheered up Arlene as well, bringing color back to her cheeks. She and I didn’t need to talk about it. We were on the same wavelength. We shared our theories with Ritch, especially the one about Deimos as a spaceship and what we had discovered about the hyperspace tunnel. He had already guessed a lot.

Then we continued our journey up the ring finger, where we’d seen the shack. We ran into one specter, hardly a match for the three of us. I couldn’t help contrasting our casualness now with my terror at seeing my first zombie. Nowadays, I was almost blase.

We prowled our way up to the ancient, crumbly, wooded hut. Hell needed a facelift.

“Check out the lock,” Arlene said, grinning like a girl with a Christmas of accessories for her favorite doll. “I love these!”

“Why?” I asked.

“They take an old-fashioned key.”

“I’ll help you look for it,” Ritch said before I could.

“Hell with that,” she said. “I’ve already got one!” She dismantled one of the pistols; then she took the gas-expander stabilizer spline for a flexor and the fixed end of the magazine-advance spring for a tensor. It took her just five minutes to pick the lock.

“Where’d you learn that?” Ritch asked.

“I read a lot of comic books.”

“You need help putting that back together?” I asked with a straight face. I couldn’t resist teasing her a little. She rolled her eyes and reassembled the piece in nothing Hat. She

made us wait until she was good and ready to open the shack door.

Inside was a switch. Surprise, surprise, surprise ... as our patron saint Gomer might say. Arlene did the honors, lowering the wall ahead, revealing a hidden platform containing a dozen dead, mangled, squashed imps and a teleport pad.

“It’s about that time,” she said.

“I want a new travel agent,” I said.

We teleported and stared, stunned into angry silence.

We were right back where we’d started after crawling down the hyperspace tunnel! The only improvement was we still had our clothes and weapons—and Ritch, of course.

-31

“Deja,” said Arlene.

“Vu,” I said.

“Dejah Thoris,” Ritch said, and Arlene snorted. They were speaking some kind of secret code. I wasn’t going to worry about it. Starting all over was something to worry about.

As before, I inserted my arm up to the elbow in the membranal switch and opened the door. Inside, we found Weems and Yoshida in the same room, same position, still joined head-to-head . . . and still holding their pistols in exactly the same position as before. Clothed!

We stared for a long time, and poor Bill Ritch had no idea why Arlene and I were so stunned; he started to examine the bodies, but Arlene gently pulled him back before he could see what they’d done to them.

“This is worse than the monsters,” I said. We passed by and crawled through the narrow tunnel, a very tight fit for Ritch.

When we reached the end, we faced the same seven imps as before, only this time we used shotguns. At least that was an improvement.

We popped the same door. Out came two pumpkins, just like last time. The pumpkins were pretty much the same except for varying sizes. Arlene used the AB-10, and I

finished them off with a shotgun, our favorite tactic. Ritch made a comment that was new: “They’d look better with two burning candles for eyes instead of that headlight in the center.” No one argued.

We started to bypass the collapsing pier, going for the other door instead; but suddenly Arlene said, “Fly, I have a feeling we should duplicate our actions as precise-ly as we can.”

“Arlene, last time the demons creamed you in that narrow hallway,” I reminded her. She nodded, a bit shaky at the thought. She wasn’t in any condition to survive a bout like that again. I pursued the point:

“We’ve already deviated by not taking Weems’s and Yoshida’s pistols and by killing the pumpkins outside.”

“I know,” she said. “I don’t have any good argument except for female intuition.” I was about to make a crack about the unlikelihood of that particular attribute in Arlene Sanders, but I saw that she was deadly serious. She glared at me until I saw reason.

We left Ritch in the corridor. He wasn’t in shape for what we had in mind. Of course, after we cleared a path for him, he could stroll through in relative safety. We ran like bats out of Deimos down the pier, this time charging through the illusory wall of flame and blowing away the imps we knew to be on the other side.

There was another reason I’d insisted we leave Ritch behind, one I kept to myself: I half thought we’d find a second Bill Ritch hanging from the ceiling here.

We didn’t. . . and I never brought the subject up to Arlene or Ritch. God only knows whether they thought of it themselves—probably, but they kept quiet as well.

We slipped back by the secret corridor and used the same trick on the pumpkins and imps inside the room. It was a lot easier when we knew what to expect. This time I knew where the last pumpkin would be floating in ambush when I opened the door, and I enjoyed not being surprised. Pop goes the pumpkin.

Crossing the patio, Arlene grabbed the chain saw and revved it up; but she made me promise to start shooting the moment she lost it this time. Except that this time, since she knew what to expect, she didn’t slip and wasn’t out of position where a demon could knock the chain saw out of her hand. She ducked. She weaved. She sawed all the demons to death. It was hard to believe she’d been seriously injured only a short time before; but having a chance to get it right the second time did wonders for her psychological recovery.

We continued up the narrow corridor to the teleport. “So what happens now?” I asked. “Back to the hand again?

I should’ve kept my hole shut. We stepped aboard, but instead of teleporting, the walls of the chamber lowered into the floor, leaving us standing behind some pillars in a very wide open courtyard.

A neat row of UAC boxes stretched across the court-yard before us like a skyscraper on its side. Every box held a five-pack of rockets—all the rockets in the world. There was also another launcher.

A silver lining like this couldn’t possibly arrive without an accompanying thundercloud. We heard the thunder of the heaviest feet in all monsterdom. Another lovely steam-demon . . . and there weren’t any convenient zero-g zones around this time.

“What the hell is that?” Ritch whispered, crouching behind a pillar.

“That, my friend, is a steam-demon. Fifteen feet tall, long horns, a missile launcher for an arm—”

“Oh, one of those,” Ritch said, nodding.

“You know about them?” asked an incredulous

Arlene.

“Sure; I’ve just never seen one before. They ripped off my programming for an ore-crusher to run the creature.” His tone of voice was what you hear in small claims court, offended about business-as-usual.

“Any way to sabotage it?”

Ritch frowned in thought. A steam-demon was large enough to inspire frowns in anyone. “If you can get me around back, maybe,” he said. “That’s where the missile feeder is.”

“Worth a try,” I said. I looked at Arlene, and she nodded. We dashed out to either side of the pillars as the steam-demon spotted us. It was as ugly as last time, but not as terrifying when frozen in indecision about which target to attack. While it made up its mind, assuming it had one, Arlene and I fired rockets from opposite directions.

At last the steam-demon chose the prettier target and raised its missile-launching hand. Arlene saw what was coming and dived behind her pillar. Three small cruise missiles struck dead-on, shattering the pillar.

I jumped out and shot the sucker over and over until I got its attention. As the big ugly mother deigned to notice me, I popped behind my own column; Arlene repeated the same process, out from her cover and blasting away. It was kind of like dealing with the playground bully where the stakes were real.

The steam-demon proved that it had a mind by passing our little intelligence test. It stomped closer to the pillars, cutting off our angle. Arlene was ready for this. She ran backward, zigzagging, popping off an occasional rocket.

Time for Ritch's plan.

While all this was happening, Ritch and I were moving into position. When the monster was finally standing with its back to the pillars, lining up a fatal shot for Arlene, I interlaced my fingers, bent down, and let Ritch climb aboard. Heavy as he was, I could barely boost him up high enough to grab the back of Godzilla for the ride of his life.

He shoved his hand into the missile-loading machinery up to the elbow. I ditched him, as agreed beforehand, and leapt to a safer position to try something else in case Ritch failed.

Arlene was still dodging around as if she were an actress at a producers' convention. She was too busy now to even take a shot. Besides, she wasn't going to risk hitting Ritch. As for the behemoth, it hadn't even noticed that someone was riding on its back.

Then Ritch ripped out a cable, and the steam-demon noticed.

It jammed its left arm back at an impossible angle; it could just barely brush Ritch, but couldn't bring much force against him, not enough to dislodge him.

The hand with the launcher had a better angle; the steam-demon got it back, pointed at Ritch, and I held my breath, expecting Armageddon. But at the last moment, rarely used self-preservation circuitry kicked in, preventing the big guy from firing into its own missile supply. The steam-demon alternately swatted at Ritch from both sides until our man finished his task and jumped down.

Then Bill Ritch started running, headed in my direction. The steam-demon turned around with great deliberation and aimed its missile launcher at Ritch's head. This was point-blank range. Ritch would never have to worry about a hat again. The monster fired. We heard a loud, empty click. Nothing happened. Ritch kept running. The steam-demon kept clicking, pointing and clicking, as if it couldn't fathom the situational evolution. It flunked that intelligence test.

Arlene didn't waste the opportunity. She started pumping at it from behind. The poor

bastard turned and aimed its useless arm at her. Click! I shot it three times with my own compact rockets. I kept at it, squeezing the ring until my palm became numb; after what must have been twenty-five direct hits at least, the titan finally staggered and fell to the deck like a skyscraper under demolition—I kept fifing, and it got weaker and weaker.

Then Arlene got smart, ran around back, and pumped a couple into the missile supply; the steam-demon's last words were pretty spectacular. I was surprised the entire hyperspace tunnel didn't collapse.

I was tired. But Arlene and Ritch were still full of fire.

We went back the way we'd come, but there had been a change in the architecture. Walls no longer stood where they had. Floor plans were different. A room that had been a small, empty antechamber was now a huge room with the equivalent of a "beach" against which red waves of toxin washed relentlessly.

"Look!" Arlene said. I followed her pointing finger to the unwelcome sight of a hell-prince wading through the crimson toxic surf. After playing patty-cake with the steam-demon, a minotaur didn't seem that serious—but back on Phobos, Arlene had ripped through a crack to avoid one, and I'd been almost paralyzed with fright. How times change!

But it wouldn't do to be careless. We took it left, right, left, right with rockets until it was slagged. It made one gratifying "Ork!" before dying.

The long, narrow corridor where Arlene had chain-sawed the demons was now one edge of a triangular room full of specters. We gave that a pass, rushing through before the lumbering, invisible pinkies could avenge their more-visible cousins; we beat cleats back to the door leading to the central corridor and slamming it, jamming the latch with some 10mm rounds.

We didn't see anything in the corridor outside, so we went back along the secret passage by which we had exited from the room behind the illusory wall. From that room we could see that the lava lake now had a wall at the back, and next to it a corridor that offered the possibility of dry land. I was about to slog across the corridor when Ritch got into the act.

"Why don't you use the toxic protection suit?" he asked, pointing.

"What? Where?"

"See those coveralls?"

Huh! I pulled one on over my armor and boots before making a dash through the crud to the island behind it. There, I found the damnedest rifle I'd ever seen, huge, gyrostabilized, and with a gigantic battery backpack. Hoisting it up, I was pleased that it was a lot lighter than it looked and considerably less unwieldy. Grinning like I'd won a bowling league trophy, I humped back to where the others were waiting.

It was a good thing I followed Ritch's advice on the protective suit; the toxic glop ate away at the material with a consistent low hiss for company. I started feeling lousy by the time I was out of the stuff, but at least I wasn't in pain. Arlene reached out to help me climb from the red pool.

"Get it off!" she said. "Your suit is disintegrating." I eagerly stripped for her. She noticed a telltale bulge under the suit. "What's this?" she asked.

I looked at it. "It's a... it's a big, freaking gun, I guess."

"What's it do?"

"I hate to say it, but we'd better find out in combat; I don't want to waste power. Ritch?" He looked at the thing and shook his head.

My skin was tingling after dumping the suit. We three exchanged that special expression that is only shared by those who skirt close to death. We touched hands, more than a handshake—more like taking a secret oath.

There was nowhere to go but back out to the court-yard, and now I was glad we'd already popped the two pumpkins. We found another difference in the pattern: a new door next to the old, this one locked. Arlene dropped to her knees and fiddled with it. "Bad news," she said finally. "I can't pick this one."

That was annoying. I'd about convinced myself that she could handle any of these. Surveying the scenery, I noticed a third door on the far side of the courtyard. This place was turning into a hotel lobby! "Let's try over there," I suggested.

We skulked through the doorway and entered a dark corridor. I took point and no one argued. I suppose I'd become careless. I didn't notice the teleport pad until I'd stepped on it.

This one was quick, but it made me feel like I wanted to throw up. Suddenly I was standing on a triangular platform directly behind two pumpkins, not two meters away!

They didn't see me. That was a good thing because there was no way I could kill them quickly with a shotgun or pistol. It would take multiple shots to destroy them, and at this range, long before that happened they'd fry me with their lightning balls. And I could forget about rockets, unless I had a "burning" desire to be a burn-ward poster boy.

This seemed a fine time to give the big freakin' gun—call it a BFG—a shot. Taking a deep breath, I raised this fine piece of Union Aerospace Corporation craftsmanship and pointed it at the nearest oblivious target. There was no obvious trigger mechanism, so I squeezed the hand grip. There was no kick at all. Instead, I heard a loud whine of energy. The pumpkins heard it also and started rotating.

Nothing had come out of the muzzle of the weapon yet; I had just about decided I'd made a big freakin' mistake when a green ball of energy exploded from the sealed mouth of the gun. The light was so bright it seared my eyes . . . the pumpkins screamed and popped like balloons, leaving nothing but smoking, blue and orange shreds.

But my troubles were not over; I wasn't back home with my feet up.

A horde of zombies poured out of cubbyholes that were like eyes stretched up and down both corridors. Funny how I hadn't noticed them until trouble came out. Exhaustion was taking its toll and making me lose my edge.

I'd already dropped to my belly when I heard the unmistakable clatter of machine-gun bullets ripping over my head. Who the hell was shooting now? The attack came from behind. I was tired of attacks coming from behind.

Rolling to the side, staying low, I fired off another BFG blast down the corridor to the left. The results were good—a large bunch of fried zombies. I was ready to institute a firm gun-control policy for all undead: I would firmly control my BFG as I fired it.

Leaping down from the pumpkin platform, I bolted along the corridor to the left end, ducking into a cubby-hole myself. Old rule: when a bad guy comes out of a hole, he's not there anymore. I laid down the BFG and unslung my trusty shotgun, then poked my nose out of the cubbyhole again. Seemed like a good idea at the time.

A stream of bullets came out of nowhere and I ducked back in. And at last I figured out what the hell was happening: it was Arlene! She must be firing across the hidden teleport pad . . . and her bullets were being teleported to where I had first emerged. No wonder the zombies were confused. This was enough to confuse someone with a functional brain.

She was doing just as good a job of mowing them down as if she'd been present and accounted for. Encouraged, I helped out and shot the ones who ran past my cubbyhole, hunting for an enemy. So specters weren't the only ones who could play this game. Of course, the zombies got mad and started shooting each other.

They were all dead by the time Arlene joined me. She hopped off the pad and I filled her in. Then we returned to the end of the corridor where I had hidden; I'd seen a door awaiting our attentions.

There was no special key required to open this one; of course not ... a hell-prince waited for us on the other side.

It had a blue key card in its mouth; we took it after making a fair trade: he got a whole bunch of rockets. I'm sure the minotaur appreciated our generosity.

Returning to the mouth of the corridor, we picked up Ritch. We hadn't forgotten him. Ritch never seemed to regret missing out on our repeated exterminations, al-though he acquitted himself admirably when backed into a corner ... the perfect civilian. He'd have done well at Lexington and Concord, provided there wasn't a lot of running involved.

The three of us trucked back across the courtyard to the locked door—and none of us was the least surprised when the key unlocked it.

Inside was a single, ornate teleport pad. We blinked into existence in a vast room, a huge, open pit with a narrow catwalk running around the periphery. Our eyes watered from mist in the air. The place stank of boiled rock and the walls were the color of dried blood, and everywhere was the stench of sour lemons.

"This is it!" Ritch said, suddenly excited. "This is the place where the spider, the mastermind, interrogated me."

I'd been getting to the point of dismissing any differ-ences in the hellish architecture. All the chambers seemed more and more identical. But they'd never tortured me, stringing me up to hang halfway between life and death. There was no doubting Ritch's memory after what he'd been through.

We heard a cacophony from below, as if a monster convention was being held under our noses. We dropped on our bellies, hugging the catwalk, and listened.

I heard roaring, grunting, screaming, wheezing, howling, snuffling, and even a weird piping or whistling. Heavy thumping and thudding left no doubt that some of the big guys were down there. Didn't hear a steam-demon, though; that was the only good news.

“If you want to see the spidermind, now’s your chance,” Ritch whispered.

“Isn’t it special invitation only?” Arlene asked.

“I can’t help it,” I whispered. “I’m a born Gate-crasher.”

She crawled to the edge. “Pumpkins, hell-princes, those crazy flying skulls.”

“Did we ever get around to naming them?”

Arlene looked at me with a strange expression, as if I’d just missed something. “Gee . . . how about ‘flying skulls’? Any objections?”

Shaking my head, I couldn’t help but notice Hitch’s expression. He probably thought our little name game the pinnacle of insanity. And Ritch had a gift for it himself: he’d called our steam-demon a “cyberdude,” and “spidermind” turned out to be a perfect description for the thing that chose that moment to make a big entrance.

It was worse than all the rest.

If I’d found the steam-demon disgusting with its mixture of organic and mechanical, this completely alien It scuttling across the floor down below completely turned my stomach. Numerous mechanical legs sup-ported a dome housing a gigantic, gray, pulsing brain with a hideous, ersatz face formed in the center of the squishy gray matter itself, complete with “eyes” and “teeth.” It should have been funny, almost a cartoon—but there was nothing remotely humorous about the living incarnation of a nightmare.

Its appearance was so unnerving that one could easily neglect taking inventory of the most important thing: its weapons. Even from this awkward angle it was easy to see that it came equipped with what looked like an ultraspeed Gatling gun, like a Vulcan cannon. There was little doubt that up close there’d be other unpleasant surprises.

“Listen,” I hissed, “suppose we can take this spidermind thing. We’d throw a monkey wrench into the invasion plans right here and now! I could run along the catwalk, drop down in front of the creature and fry it with my new toy.”

“Too dangerous,” Arlene said.

“It would get you with its machine guns before you got close enough to try,” Ritch added.

These were extremely good points, I had to admit. Rethinking the idea, I realized that even if I succeeded, I would be ripped to shreds by the throng of monsters surrounding

the boss. Ritch seemed to be reading my thoughts when he said: “We should kill some of the other creatures so the spidermind won’t have as much back-up.” Maybe this guy could make an honorary Marine after all.

Creeping along the catwalk rim, peeking over the edge, we made slow progress. While finding a more advantageous position, Ritch sneezed. I think he was allergic to monsters.

The element of surprise blown, it was time to open fire and blow them away. Their reward for paying attention. Arlene and I worked through the rockets we’d scavenged from the steam-demon chamber. Good distance and angle to use those little darlings.

There had been so much noise already that plenty of the monsters farther away still hadn’t noticed what was going on. They were partying down. Our primary goal was to keep the spidermind from noticing as long as inhumanly possible, so we never shot a rocket in its direction.

We still had a lot of unanswered questions: How well did the brain hear? And were other creatures supposed to report back—and were they in constant communication, by radio or telepathy?

We continued the slaughter. Ritch was proving himself useful again, this time with his Sig-Cow. Finally, the general run of monsters noticed that something was amiss.

Some became agitated and began to run about, their roars more thoughtful, attuned to the condition of the general community . . . communication, obviously. A few even attempted to apply what mentality they had to “investigate” the mysterious deaths of their comrades.

Alas, the spidermind lived up to its name. It detected the trouble and began stomping around, trying to identify the source. But my respect for that great quantity of gray matter declined somewhat as the damned thing got frustrated and started blasting away at random, killing its troops!

Ritch crept over and offered more analysis: “Corporal

Taggart, I—”

“Call me Fly.”

“Well, Fly, I’ve been thinking that the amount of energy required to actually move Deimos through hyper-space would be monumental. There’s no way they could have snuck such a huge power generator onto Deimos through those fairly small Gates. We’re

talking many terawatts, thousands of Hoover Dams worth of power."

"Makes sense," I said. Arlene nodded, while continuing to hold down the fort.

"The most likely explanation is that the power is coming from an external source," he said, "and they're beaming it in somehow."

"Ritch," Arlene said, "are you saying cut the power and end the invasion?" For the first time since seeing the spawning vats, I began to think we might really have a chance. So long as they had power, they could produce an endless number of monsters in their damned caldrons.

It was time to cancel their service.

-33

Arlene pointed at a central building, a small pillbox structure right in the center of the monster convention. In all the chaos, none of the creatures had gotten anywhere near this pillbox ... as if they deliberately avoided it.

"Could that be the power receiver?" she asked.

Ritch shrugged. "I don't know, but it seems like the best possibility."

That possibility did as much for our morale as if we'd each been given a blue face-sphere. The spidermind continued firing until many of the other creatures, its own troops, were killed or driven off. It was now or never.

I jumped first, feeling as if I could fly. Arlene followed and I turned to help, but she didn't need a hand. We both had to help Ritch, who wasn't exactly constructed for flight. The three of us made a dash for the central building.

Monster corpses presented a major obstacle; but we quickly turned grateful for the thick-limbed, heavy bodies all over the floor. The spidermind noticed us and opened fire with its 30mm Vulcans. We hit the deck and used the bodies for cover.

The incredible creature charged us, firing maybe three hundred rounds a minute, five rounds a second. In a few moments it would be upon us, firing so rapidly we'd never be able to return fire.

Suddenly the firing stopped. The spidermind was tangled up in the bodies it had helped

produce. The mechanical spider legs were not designed for an obstacle course.

“Run!” I shouted, heading for the building. A quick glance at the location of the spidermind told me what I needed to know—the angles were perfect. “Get between the spidermind and the building—move!”

I bolted hutward and immediately sprawled gracefully over the prone body of a steam-demon—a steam-demon! My heart leapt up my throat. . . then I realized the damned thing was under bloody construction. Great, and me without my monkey wrench!

The gigantic monster lay on its belly, face into the deck; the missiles were exposed, and as bullets flew haphazardly over my head I swallowed hard: a couple of good shots might detonate the warheads on those puppies—or, if the warheads weren’t yet attached, the fuel cells could rupture and spray us all with caustic and flammable rocket fuel.

“Very adroit, Mr. Leslie,” snapped Arlene, yanking me to my feet.

We made tracks. We had crossed perhaps a third of the open territory when a wave of horror struck me like a physical hammer blow.

Nightmarish images of Degas, Bosch, Patrick Woodruff. . . blood dripping from the walls and ceiling, sprays of blood in the distance, blood from overhead sprinklers ... it probed, trying to find a weak spot: my father lurched out of the building, grinning and slapping his body. “Me heap big chief Kamehameha!” he shouted, then gave a Tarzan yell.

He humiliated me all over again, as he had twenty years earlier; we’d been in Hawaii in a museum, before a life-size (huge) statue of Hawaii’s greatest king. I shrank away from him, praying to God no one knew he was my father; but he followed me, saying, “Did you see what I did? Watch!” And he did it again!

I was never more ashamed of him in my life. We were lucky to make it out of the museum alive. But goddamn it, he was not going to stop me reaching that building. I pushed on, tuning out the spidermind.

Then I saw myself brought up on charges again, but this time I was tried and convicted, and they ripped the stripes off my sleeve like, what was it, that old television show, two-dimensional, . . Branded, something like that. They tore off my sharpshooter’s medal, my ribbons, finally the eagle-and-globe that told the world I was a Marine.

But I gritted my teeth, and through my tears I told myself that I knew I was a Marine no matter what, and Arlene would never let me forget it even if I tried.

My feet never stopped.

God knows what horrors it sent to Arlene and Ritch; their faces were white, grim, but determined.

The monstrosity realized it didn't have our number psychologically and tried the more direct route: it opened fire. But it was off balance, picking its way through the bodies, and the whole contraption tumbled over. This gave us the time to get into position. Just as we got behind the building, the spidermind freed itself, stood up straight on mechanical legs, swiveled the weaponry into position . . . and started firing. A few quick burps of gunfire probed our way; then it abruptly choked off and there was silence.

"What happened?" Ritch asked.

"It's like it stopped automatically," Arlene said.

"It can't shoot us without shooting the building!" I realized. "The guns were clearly cut off by a circuit breaker."

We had to get inside; but the spidermind lived up to its name. The thing scuttled quickly to the side, trying for a better angle and a clear shot. We kept moving, dancing around the pillbox in a tightening spiral, always keeping ourselves between the spidermind and the building. It was like playing some kind of children's game, only this playground was the killing field.

Then we had a new problem. The other monsters had been considerate enough to stay away, but now the noise attracted them back into the fray. A random sampling of fireballs, ball lightning, and even the hell-princes' green fire creased our bow. Under the circumstances, it would have been rude not to respond. We fired back, while we kept running from the spidermind.

"One rocket left!" I yelled as I fired the penultimate one at a minotaur. I slung the launcher—never know when a weapon might come in handy. But Arlene must've figured there'd be no more rainy days: she blew through her AB-10 ammo and dropped the pistol with-out a second glance, not wanting anything to slow her down.

Bill Ritch fired his Sig-Cow at the spinys and actually dropped one.

Despite his bulk, he'd managed to keep up with us, although his heavy breathing was cause for worry. I hoped he wouldn't have a heart attack. We still needed him. I wasn't being callous in thinking this; the mission was all-important.

God, did I actually think that? I guess I did. Arlene had converted me . . . and I didn't

even know when she managed it. My goal had shifted from rescuing her to fighting the last battle as the last Marine.

I blew the door off its hinges with a point-blank shotgun blast. One of the spinys didn't approve of my housebreaking; it dive-bombed me and flung a ball of burning mucus that just missed . . . just missed me that is. Arlene took it out—but then I glanced over at Ritch and saw that the imp had done him serious damage.

Ritch had taken a faceful of the poison and was coughing his guts up. Holding the door open with my back, I racked and fired as fast as I could as Arlene dragged Ritch inside.

Vindication! The room was full of electronic gear, cables, data banks. While Arlene did what she could for Ritch, damned little under the circumstances, I stood guard on all four doors, shooting anything that ventured dose. Naturally, the monsters couldn't fire back. I enjoyed the situation until one of the imps flung a spitwad and hit the door frame, missing me by a hand's-breadth.

For one moment in the history of the universe, the spidermind and Yours Truly shared the same opinion. The imp's action was ill-considered in the extreme. The spidermind proved it was no dummy; it blew the imp to cutlets.

I drifted from doorway to doorway and nothing shot at me; however, every time I passed within line-of-sight of the spidermind, I caught another faceful of hypnogogic horror. It was the only weapon the critter had left; in a way, you had to feel sorry for it.

Well. . . maybe not.

"How's it going?" I asked Arlene, already knowing the answer. She shook her head. Ritch was in a lot worse shock than when we first found him. The flaming goo had stuck to his face, catching him just as he inhaled; his lungs were fried . . . they could no longer transport oxygen to his blood.

I didn't know what we were going to do; maybe a hospital could save him . . . but we didn't even have bandages or painkiller.

The skin of his face was angry red, and it was bleeding in a dozen spots where enough layers of epidermis had burned away. He must have been in agony .. . and Ritch knew it was hopeless, for him at least; he was a smart man.

Bill was dying.

Arlene propped him against a wall and whispered in his ear. He nodded, making the coughing worse; but she wiped his eyes, and he could see well enough to help us.

In a weak voice he began identifying critical components within the room. He remembered everything from when they forced him to work on the mess. He told us what we needed to know.

Arlene left him propped against the wall and came to me. In a low voice she said “I wish we had one of those blue spheres right now.”

“It’s the only thing that would save him,” I agreed.

“We don’t even have a Medikit. At least I could make him comfortable.”

I looked her in the eye. “He told us what we need to know,” I said. “That’s the important thing.”

I felt professional. I felt several degrees colder than mean.

But Arlene was as much a pro as I. “Do you want to perform the coup de grace on this energy conduit, or shall I?”

While I thought about it, she made up my mind for me:

“You’d better do it, Fly; we need a real sharpshooter’s eye to keep those bastards far enough away that they can’t reach in and grab us. I suppose even you can’t miss a computer bank from two meters away, hey? Even if you can’t shoot an apple off Goforth’s head.” She grinned.

I turned and became a one-man wrecking crew. Raising the BFG, I took a deep breath and let fly at the collection of electronics. The explosion knocked me on my butt. I staggered up and took out the rest of the targets Ritch pointed out in the mass of equipment. After four walloping shots, the BFG fizzled and wouldn’t shoot anymore. Out of juice. I finished the job with a dozen shotgun shells.

“Jesus, Fly! Come look at this,” Arlene shouted. I came, still shaking, ears still ringing like Christmas.

This was turning into an hour of surprises. The monsters were acting like they were on PCP, wandering in circles and firing at anything that moved—which meant each other.

The spidermind still seemed to have control over its ugly faculties. It opened fire on several of the hell-princes, no doubt with the idea of removing those of its minions most potentially dangerous if there were no way to give them orders.

Naturally, the executions drew the attention of other monsters. They fired at the noise.

We weren't cast members in that show, but we took full advantage of our backstage passes.

Fifteen minutes later there was one monster, count 'em, one monster left that we could see. For the moment, the spidermind was boss over itself. And it had one other problem besides not being able to get any decent help. The gun cylinders spun, empty. The spider hadn't saved any ammo for us.

"Ritch," Arlene said, speaking quietly but enunciating clearly, "your plan worked brilliantly."

I'm sure he would have appreciated her good opinion of him—if he had still been alive.

The damned, stupid spiny had killed him after all. I stared at the dead face of Bill Ritch, the captivity and torture survivor, comrade, the man who gave us a real chance to defeat the alien invaders. I looked at this brand new corpse and something snapped.

"I'm sick of this," I told Arlene. I shrugged off my beloved rocket launcher and handed it to my best gal-pal. "Keep an eye on me, First Class. You'll know when to use it... and don't, God damn it, miss."

"Show me the apple, Flynn Taggart, and I'll pop it off your head."

I loaded up my shotgun, for attention-grabbing purposes only, and calmly walked out to face the ugliest alien of them all.

"Hey, spider baby," I called out. "Yeah, I'm talking to you!"

The turret turned. The spidermind and I looked at each other .. . and suddenly I was overwhelmed with the most horrific vision of all: I saw the Earth in flames, burning buildings, fields, oceans of corpses. I saw the demons, not just aliens, but honest-to-Lucifer demons, wading through the rivers of filth and blood and urine, laughing in triumph.

I saw mankind under the heel. Collars around our throats, chains on wrists and ankles. I saw collaborators, traitors, quislings, turncoats of every race and culture.

I saw a "Vichy" Earth government.

And I saw in the distance an endless parade of bigger and more ghastly demons. They filled the land from end to end, sea to shining sea.

And I knew this vision was no nightmare plucked from my own subconscious fears.

This was reality.

I saw the future. I leaned forward and spat upon the shredded machine mind.

“Remember the imp you had talk to me back on Phobos? That creepy leatherface asked for my surrender. Well, here’s my answer, you insect!”

Raising my shotgun, I took careful aim and blasted toward the brain inside the crystal case. Then I did it again. And again. And again. I stopped at eight shots because I’d run out of shells, and because the turret had finally rotated in my direction and was chewing up the deckplates with 30mm rounds.

I slalomed through the heaped corpses, looking for one in particular. . . one body not dead but pre-born, as my nuns would say, though in a hell of a different context.

I was looking for my steam-demon, and that had to be a first!

The spidermind scuttled after me; on open ground it could make quite a clip ... quite a bit faster than a mere two-legger like me. But we weren’t on open ground; I chose my route well. I leapt from body to body like Eliza across the ice floes, and the frustrated arachnoid android started shooting the corpses out of the way for clearer footing.

I put some distance between us, and for a moment the stupid thing lost me! Great... I should’ve brought an air horn. Crouching so I wouldn’t get clopped by a stray, I loaded up, stood, and fired a few more shells. It spotted me, screamed in triumph—just like you’d expect an insect to sound, magnified a billion times—and charged, Gatling barrels spinning like gyroscopes.

I ran the hundred in world-record time. I flung myself through the air in a graceful swan dive, tucked at the last second, and rolled beautifully—dislocating my shoulder.

I struggled up, shifted the shotgun to my right, weak hand, reached over the steam-demon, and let fly with the last shell.

My cough was answered by a diarrhea of Vulcan Cannon rounds that tore up the iron flesh of the steam-demon like an AB-10 tears up plaster. The bullets ripped the legs apart; they ripped the head apart.

They ripped the missiles apart.

I clenched my teeth .. . now was the moment of truth.

If they’d already attached those warheads . .. Well, I guess I’d either go north and meet

the nuns, or ... or stay right where I was—in Hell!

Fifteen seconds and 750 rounds later, sudden silence startled me back to the here-and-now. My ears throbbed and rang, and my skull felt like it was still vibrating; but the spidermind had stopped shooting to see what dam-age it had done.

I wasn't about to stick my head up, but I didn't need to: I closed my eyes and sniffed deeply.

There is a smell most people don't know, but once you've tasted it, you never forget it. Anyone who's hung around a Marine air base or Naval air station remembers and pilots remember from the airport: it's the pungent aroma of JP-9 "jet propellant," and it tears through your septum, up your nasal passages, and straight into your brain. Think of ammonia, formaldehyde, and skunk-juice swirled together into a malt.

There was no possibility of error . . . dozens of gallons of the burn-juice pooled around the steam-demon; in fact, looking down, I saw it seeping from under the body onto my side, eating away at my boots worse than the green sludge.

My bruised eardrums were trying to tell me something urgent, a sound behind the ringing and throbbing: clicking feet. The spidermind was on its way to investigate!

I backed slowly away, crouching lower and lower to stay behind the steam-demon; then the spidermind loomed, and I could no longer hide.

It screamed again, this time in rage, not triumph, and charged.

It slipped in the fuel slick that it itself had created. It tried to rise and slipped again, skating in the horrible stuff. JP-9 dripped from the spidermind's underbelly, splashed up and down its legs, even sprayed across the crystal canopy.

Time to split that apple, A.S.!

I dashed to the side, waving frantically at the building;

I couldn't see Arlene. I pointed at the spidermind, screaming, "Now, now, you crazy bitch!" She couldn't hear me, of course, or I never would have said such a thing!

A tiny bud of red bloomed in the black doorway, flowering into the bright-red tail exhaust of our very last rocket. I hit the deck, hands over head, belatedly wondering whether any of the jet propellant had sprayed on me. . .

I barely heard the explosion through the ringing, but the force kicked me in my

dislocated shoulder. After a moment with my eyes shut, arms locked over my head, I ventured a glance.

The spidermind screeched and skittered, joyously engulfed in bright white flames, like one of Weem's monks protesting the war in Kefiristan by immolating himself with burning gasoline.

I watched for several minutes, keeping low as the last of the spidermind's ammo exploded, bursting off in all directions. Mobility lasted only half a minute, then the intense heat melted the crystal canopy, turning the truck-size brain into a crispie critter in seconds. It took longer for the metal body to liquefy, even longer for the whole mass to bubble through the melted deckplates. At last there was nothing left of the dreaded spidermind but a smoking crater. . . . "Get used to it," I muttered, unable to even hear my own voice. "Think of this as a rehearsal for the next eternity."

A hand grabbed my arm—my left arm. "No!" I screamed; then I screamed again in pain as Arlene yanked on my dislocated shoulder.

"Jesus, Fly, I'm sorry!" I faintly heard her voice, as if through a speakerphone across the room.

I rolled onto my back, swearing like a drunken longshoreman. "Oh," she said, "I see what it is. Hang on, Fly, this is going to hurt—but you'll thank me for it in a minute."

Would you believe she grabbed my biceps, pulled my arm out of the socket, and snapped it back into place?

I passed out.

I came to in a few seconds, then cursed her out again, sorting the epithets alphabetically, in case I missed any. I passed through the scatological and had started on the blasphemous when she shut me up by planting a big, wet boot-heel on my mouth.

She sat me up; by then, my ears were starting to recover, and I could hear what she said. "Pretty spectacular, Fly. I guess we won. . . . Ritch would've loved this spread now."

But still I heard the hum of power. The lights remained lit. Something was wrong with this picture.

"I hope you won't take this wrong," said Arlene, staring curiously around, "but why aren't we plunged into terrible darkness, Fly Taggart?"

"I know what you mean, A.S. We can't feel total satisfaction until we're freezing to

death in the black night of space . . .”

“And running out of air.”

“So what’s gone wrong with Bill Ritch’s plan?”

She frowned in thought. “I guess that building didn’t house the power receiver, after all,” she said. “It must have been the communications gear by which the spidermind was controlling all the other creatures.”

“You mean all the creatures left on Deimos and Phobos will destroy one another, like these guys did?” I smiled ... I like that thought.

“The spidermind was barely able to control them as it was,” she pointed out. “They have a natural hatred for each other.”

I remembered the crucified hell-princes. Then I remembered Bill, dying from the stupid blast from a stupid imp. Now he was gone!

Focus, Fly . . . focus.

We went back in the control room and I threw a piece of canvas over Ritch. We laid his body out in the place that was the most appropriate crypt: the scene of his victory over the demons.

“All right,” I said. “I think we should retrace our steps back to the surface of Deimos. Maybe we can figure out how to get back to Mars from there, or at least figure out where in hell we are.”

“Watch your language,” Arlene said seriously. Hmm, Arlene Sanders—with religion.

As we worked our way back up through the levels of Deimos, we found the dead bodies of hundreds, then thousands, of the alien monsters. It was as if the Cosmic Orkin company had come through and done a big special on demonic infestation.

There were a very few live ones, so completely out of it that they hardly seemed worth killing. Somehow Arlene and I found the will to exterminate them anyway.

When we reached the surface, we discovered the pressure dome was cracked, the air rushing out, creating a mini-hurricane. Of course, we had been adequately briefed on the basics of life in space. It would take days for all the air to escape; we weren’t planning to wait around that long.

I looked past the crack—and stopped breathing. I stared so long, forgetting to blink, that my eyes blurred.

I wasn't staring at Mars anymore. Where Mars had loomed, hanging over our heads like a wrecking ball, was a different planet, one that looked disturbingly familiar: blue-green, familiar land masses, cloud cover, teeming with six billion cousins and uncles.

We weren't in a hyperspace tunnel any longer. We looked for several minutes, hoping it was a shared hallucination. At last Arlene said, "I guess we know their invasion plans now."

As I stared at Earth in the skies of Deimos, through a cracked and broken pressure dome, I felt a queer sense of dislocation, as if I were no longer sitting inside my own body—but standing alongside. I shook, as if I had a terrible fever, mindlessly clutching at my uniform—

Weems's uniform. "Well," I began feebly, "at least we stopped them."

"Did we?" She reached out, as if trying to pet the planet.

Beyond the domes, amid the bright-flecked black of space, other bright spots flared upon the continents, shining through the scattered clouds. Nuclear explosions would look just like that; other things, worse things, could look like that as well.

"Jesus, they've already invaded," Arlene said, hope draining away from her voice faster than the escaping air.

I took her by the arm and said, "It's not over, Arlene! We've already proven who's tougher. We won't let it end like this!"

But we had no ship, no radio, not even a really long rope. We were stuck in low orbit around Earth, a mere four hundred kilometers away, hanging over our heads like the biggest balloon we could ever hope to play with.

I shut my eyes tight, then opened them. How would we do the impossible? How could we jump four hundred kilometers to Earth and kill the orbital velocity?

We didn't say anything for a very long time. We watched the white spots appearing over the northern hemisphere, over the hot, blue oceans and cool, green hills of earth.

Suddenly, Arlene gasped; her eyes opened wide. "Fly, I have it!"

"What?"

“I know how to do it!”

“Do what damn it?”

Her lips moved, silently calculating. Then she grinned.

“I know how to get us across to Earth, Fly!”

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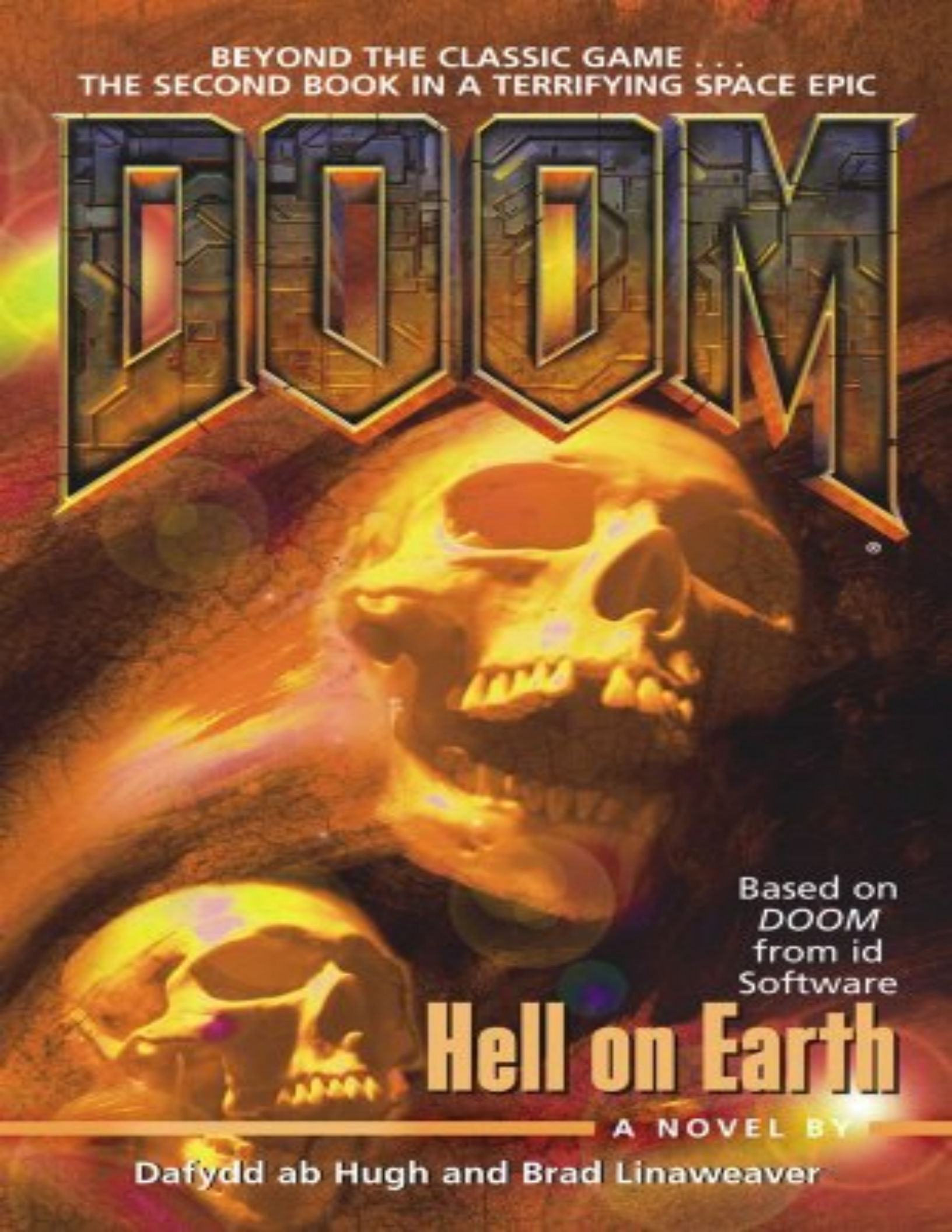

Based on *DOOM* from id Software

Hell on Earth

A NOVEL BY

Dafydd ab Hugh and Brad Linaweaver

1

As we hit the roof of Deimos, I looked up. The pressure dome was cracked. Of course. That made sense, the way things had been going. Next thing you knew, thousand-year-old Martians would come along and wink us out of existence. Fly Taggart stared at the crack, and his eyes bugged out like a frog. I wish he knew a bit more physics; if I have one complaint about Fly, it's that he doesn't hold with higher education. The crack was small, and I could see it wasn't going to leak all the air out of the dome in the next few minutes. Days, more like; days, or even weeks. It's a big facility.

Then I looked past the crack and saw what that huge Marine corporal was really staring at: we weren't orbiting Mars anymore!

The entire moon of Deimos had just taken a whirlwind tour of the solar system. I swallowed hard; we were staring at Earth.

"I … guess we know their invasion plans now," I said, feeling the blood rush to my face. Fly plucked at his uniform—Lieutenant Weems's uniform, except he'd pulled off the butter bars—like it had suddenly started itching, "Well at least we stopped them," he said.

"Look again, Fly." The globe was flecked with bright pinpoints of light, flares of explosives millions of times more powerful, more hellish, than any we had ducked or lobbed back here on Deimos. I pointed to the obvious nuclear exchange blanketing our home, dumping like a few billion tons of radiation, fallout, and sheer explosive muscle on—on everyone we had ever known. "Looks like they've already invaded."

Fly suddenly latched onto my arm with a vise grip of raging emotion. I tried to pry his steel hands loose, while he hollered in my ear. "It's not over, Arlene!"

PFC Arlene Sanders, United States Marine Corps: that's me. "We've already proven who's tougher. We won't let it end like this!"

Right. Me and Fly and nothing but weapons, ammo, and a hand with some fingers on it. We were, going to jump from LEO down to the surface of the Earth. Or maybe we'd drive the planetoid down and land it at Point Mugu. I guess you couldn't consider Deimos strictly a moon anymore, since it appeared to be mobile.

We were stuck a mere four hundred klicks from where we wanted to be: but that was four hundred kilometers straight up. What's more, we were flying around the Earth at something better than ten kilometers per second—not only would we have to jump down, we'd better do one hell of a big foot-drag to kill that orbital velocity.

And after that we'd solve Format's Last Theorem, simplify the tax code, and cure world hunger. That last one was easy enough to fix. The problem wasn't that there wasn't enough food; it was just in the wrong places and didn't last long enough. I once heard an old duffer say all we really needed was food irradiation, Seal-a-Meals, and a bunch of rocket mail tubes to plant the food in the center of the famine du jour.

Rocket mail tubes …

"Fly," I shrieked, jumping up and down. "I know how to do it!"

"Do what, damn it?"

Could we do it? I did some fast, rule-of-thumb calculations: our mass versus that of a typical "care package" from Mars, the sort they sent up to the grunts like me serving on Deimos; the Earth's gravitational pull compared to that of Mars—it's harder to fly up and down off the Earth's surface than the Martian surface. Maybe … no, it would work! Well, maybe.

"I know how to get us across to Earth, Fly. Did you know there's a maintenance shed for unmanned snipping rockets on this dump of a moon?"

"No," he said suspiciously.

Of course he didn't. He was never stationed here, like I'd been. It was a garage where the motor-pool sergeant kept all the mail tubes, the shipping rockets. I had no idea why they were called "mail tubes"; we send our mail electronically, as the universe intended. "A one-way ticket to Earth," I summed up, trying to penetrate that thick skull of his. "If we can find any kind of ship, we go home and kick some zombie ass. Again."

"All over again," he breathed, catching my drift at last. "Well, hell, we're professionals at this now!" We continued looking at the familiar blue-green sphere of Earth, as the unfamiliar white spots appeared and disappeared all over the globe. An old piece of advice floated up from deep in my memory:

DON'T LOOK DOWN! We gazed upon white clouds so beautiful that they reminded me of what we'd been fighting to save.

Were we too late? Part of me hoped so, a part that just wanted to sit down and rest.

We'd fought those damned, ugly monsters until we were too tired to fight—and now it was looking like we had to do it all over again.

All at once I noticed a sprinkling of the flares all over California, my home state. "Oh, God, Fly," I said, my stomach contracting.

"Yeah. Terrible." Jesus, couldn't my best bud think of anything stronger to say when Armageddon came to your hometown?

I shook my head. "You don't understand. That's not what I meant. I mean I don't feel anything." I trembled as I spoke.

Fly put his arm around me; well, that was more like it. "It's all right," he mumbled. "It's not what you think. There's nothing wrong with you. After what you've been through, you're just numb. Your brain is tired."

I let my head rest on his shoulder. "So my mind is coming loose. What about body and soul?" Right then and there I decided we needed a new word to describe the state after you've reached exhaustion but had to keep going on automatic pilot. Wherever that state was, Fly and I had been there a long, long time.

2

I put my arm around Arlene's shoulders, hoping she would understand it meant nothing but friendship. Oh don't be silly, Fly; of course she understands!

Where to begin? I was born at an early age, in a log cabin I helped my father build. I grew up, joined the UnitedStatesMarineCorpsSir!—went to fight "Scythe of Glory" Communist leftovers in Kefiristan, punched out the C.O., was banged up in the brig and sent to Mars with the rest of my jarhead buddies.

We up-shipped to Phobos, one of the moons of Mars—well, now the only moon of Mars—and discovered a boatload of aliens had invaded through the used-to-be-dormant "Gates," long-range teleporters from … from where? From another planet, God knows where. Arlene and I battled our way into the depths of the Phobos facility of the Union Aerospace Corporation … who started the whole invasion, turns out, by monkeying with the Gates in the first place.

It all rolled downhill from there. We ended up on Deimos somehow—and I'm still not sure how that happened!—and duked our way up one side and down the other, killing more types of monsters than you can shake a twelve-gauge at, finally ending up in a hyperspace tunnel … you'll have to ask Arlene Sanders (Exhibit A, the gal to my left) to explain what that is. But when we finally killed everything worth killing, we lucked into stopping the invasion cold. See previous report-from-the-front for full details. In the end, we faced down the spidermind—the handy nickname chosen for the spider-shaped "mastermind" of the invasion, chosen by Bill Ritch, requisat in pace, a computer genius who helped us at the cost of his own life.

Right before defeating the spidermind, I'd thought there was nothing left in me. I was certain that I couldn't have continued without Arlene, a physical reminder of what we were fighting for, like old-time war propaganda. While she breathed, I had to breathe, and fight. Blame it on the genes. We'd had the strength to go on against hundreds of monsters. We weren't about to let a little thing like the laws of physics stop us now.

Arlene couldn't stop looking at California, so I gently led her away from the sight. "You know, Arlene, I feel really stupid that I didn't think of the shed; especially after using the rocket fuel to fry the friggin' spider."

She blinked her eyes and rubbed them. I could tell she was trying not to cry. "That's why you need me, Flynn Peter Taggart."

So we went spaceship shopping.

Of course, there was the little matter of adding to our personal armaments. We hadn't seen any monsters for a while. Maybe we neutralized all of them—but I wasn't about to count on it.

"Once, I was asked why I don't like to go out on the street without being armed," I told Arlene. "Must have been an idiot," came the terse reply. She'd regained her self-control, but she was still acting defensive. We were good friends, but that made it easier for her to be embarrassed in front of me. "No, I wouldn't call her that," I continued. "But she'd lived a protected life; never came up against the mother of all storms."

"What's that?" Arlene wanted to know.

"Late-twentieth-century street slang for when the bad mother on your block decides it's time to teach you a lesson. At such times, it is advisable to carry an equalizer."

"Like this?" Arlene asked, bending down to retrieve an AB-10 machine pistol, her personal fave. Every little bit helps.

"If my friend had one of those in her purse—" I began, but Arlene interrupted.

"Too long to get it out. I like to carry on my person."

"Yeah, yeah. I was about to say if she had carried, she might be alive today."

Arlene stopped rummaging through the contents of a UAC crate and looked up. "Oh, Fly, I'm sorry." "Sometimes you get the lesson only one time, and it's pass-fail." I playfully poked the air in her direction. "Welcome back," I said.

"What do you mean?" she asked, squinting at me the way she always did when I made her defensive. "You can feel again, dear."

"Oh," she said, her body becoming more relaxed. "You're right. One person means something. Well, sometimes … if there aren't too many one persons." "One's real. There's the body on the floor. A million is just a statistic, no matter how much screaming the professional mourner does." She punched the air back at me. And she smiled. We didn't talk for a little while. We continued gathering goodies en route to the shed. It didn't take long to locate; the good news was that it was large and apparently well-stocked. It would take days to go through all the crates and boxes; but if the labels on the outside were accurate, we'd discovered a much larger inventory of parts than I would have imagined necessary for Deimos Base.

The bad news was a complete absence of ships in any state of assembly. There was nothing to fly! “Well jeez, I thought it was a great idea,” said Arlene. “Too bad it flopped.”

Somehow it seemed immoral to give up hope while standing inside Santa’s workshop. I began examining some of the boxes while Arlene kicked one across the room; but that didn’t bother me, she was never meant for the modern age she was born into. She’d have been more homey as a freebooter in the days of blood and iron, when one physically competent woman did enough in her lifetime to breed legends of lost, Amazonian races of warrior queens. She had guts; she had cold steel will. She didn’t have patience, but what the hell!

I didn’t think I would face death as well as she. I’d go down in a very nonstoic way, kicking death in the groin if I could only line up my shot.

I looked inside those boxes—big ones, little ones, all kinds of in-between ones—and an idea grew in my head, a few words slipping out.

“I wonder if it still might be possible to seize the objective,” I muttered.

Arlene heard, too. “Huh? What do you mean, seize the objective?”

I was only half listening. The little voice in the back of my head drowned her out with some really crazy stuff: “It seems ridiculous, A.S., but it could work.”

3

The stoic qualities of Arlene Sanders were better suited to facing death than being irritated by her old buddy. “Fly, what the hell are you talking about?” She stomped to where I was going through a box of thin metal cylinders, perfect for the project growing inside my head.

“Yes,” I said, “it really could work.”

Using the special tone of voice normally reserved for dealing with mentally deficient children and drunken sailors, she said: “Tell me what in God’s name you’re on about, Fly!”

I lifted my head from the box. “When I was a kid, I wanted a car real bad. I mean real bad. Real real, bad bad.”

“Here we go down memory lane,” she said with a shrug.

“See, I couldn’t afford the car,” I said, “but I wanted one.”

“Real real, bad bad?”

“I mean, I’d have taken anything with wheels and a transmission. If I couldn’t have a six, I’d settle for four. Three, anything! But no matter how much I lowered expectations, I still couldn’t afford a vehicle.” “Is this going somewhere, Fly, or do I need to hitchhike back home to Mother?”

“That’s exactly right,” I said. “I’m talking about transportation. I couldn’t afford a car—but I could afford a spare part now and then, and you know how this ended up?”

She put her hands on her hips, head tilted to the side, and said: “Let me guess! You collected spare parts, and collected and collected, and finally you were able to build your own F-20! Or was it an aircraft carrier? Amphibious landing craft?”

I ignored her. “I built myself a car. Had a few problems; no brakes exactly, but it ran; and what a powerful sound that baby made when she turned over.”

Arlene finally saw where I was headed. Memory lane dead-ended right here on Deimos. “Fly, you’re BS-ing me.”

“No, I really built an auto …”

“You are insane if you think you can build a freakin’ spaceship out of spare parts!” I literally jumped up and down. “You thought of it too,” I said. “Great idea, isn’t it? We can build a rocket and get off this rock.”

She was very tolerant. “Fly, an automobile is one thing. You’re talking about a spaceship.” I looked her straight in the eye. “After all we’ve been through, you going to tell me we can’t do this?” She looked me straight back. “Read my lips,” she said. “We can not do this.”

“We have nothing to lose, A.S. It can’t be any harder than taking down the spidermind, can it?” “You have a point there,” she said grudgingly. “So how do you propose we start?”

She was always annoyed when I used reality to win an argument. I knew it was possible. But not without a manual.

“We need some tech,” I said.

“Tech?”

“Plans … then we can give it to our design department.”

“Don’t tell me … I’m the design department.”

I smiled. “You’re the design department.”

“And what are you, Fly Taggart?”

“Everything else.”

We went looking for a manual. Ten minutes later we found one in the most logical place, which was the last place we looked, naturally: next to the coffee maker. I tried to get Arlene to make us a pot of coffee, but she stared at me as if I’d grown a third head. So I made it myself; I’d forgotten that Arlene didn’t indulge, but that was all right with me. I figured since I was the production line, I needed all the caffeine I could survive.

Next we inventoried everything we had to work with. Our best choice was to make a small mail rocket intended for one person, but capable of seating two, if they were really chummy. I wrote a list of parts needed and found almost everything within three hours … except for a thingamabob. I knew what it was really called, but I couldn’t think

of it. We spent another hour searching, and though we didn't come across it, we located more tools that would be of immeasurable value; a screwdriver, a drill bit, a magnifying glass, and a paper punch.

"Enough for now," said Arlene. "I'm sure the thingamabob will show up before we finish. We'd better get started … I have no idea how fast the air is leaking from the dome; we might have a month, we might have a couple of days!"

I wasn't going to argue with an optimistic Arlene.

Hell, I hardly ever argued with the pessimistic one. "We haven't looked under all the tarps," I said, "and there are other rooms to check too. But there is one more shopping expedition required before we start work. We need enough food and water to hold us through the job; and all the spare liquid oxygen tanks and hydrogen tanks we can find."

Arlene nodded. We were in a race with a bunch of air molecules, and they had a head start. In addition to oxygen for fuel, we actually needed to breathe now and again over the next few days. Weeks, whatever. It would be cruel fate indeed if I screwed the last bolt and hammered the final wing nut, only to keel over from oxygen deprivation.

My brain was working overtime now: "The pressure is dropping so slowly, we're not going to notice when it gets dangerous. Can you rig up something to warn us when to start taking a hit of pure oxygen?" "And regulate how much we should take. Yeah, it's a space station … I don't think I'll have much trouble finding an air-pressure sensor and rebreather kit." She pulled a gouge pad out of her shirt pocket and started taking notes. She thought of something I'd missed: "I'll look for warm clothes too, Fly. The temperature will drop as we lose pressure." "Won't the sun warm us? We're no farther away than Earth itself."

"We're underground. All this dirt makes a great insulator, unfortunately."

First day, we were good scouts, gathering supplies for our merit badge in survival. I regretted that we couldn't move what we needed to a lower level and seal off one compartment. That would stretch survival by another month. But hauling the tons of material we'd need to build a rocket was impossible. Arlene scrounged a generous supply of food, most of it produced under the dome with considerable help from the Genetics Department. After watching the monsters produced assembly-line out of the vat, I hesitated even to eat our own—human experiments in recombinant-DNA veggies and lab-grown "Meet." But Arlene wasn't queasy. She preferred the Deimos-grown peas and carrots to the real delicacy, frozen asparagus from Earth.

"I despise asparagus," she insisted.

“All right; so I hate okra.” The slimy stuff was one of my childhood loathings.

On the second day, we ran head-on into our first lesson in Spaceship Construction 101: namely, translating the manual from “techie-talk” into English. Here, what should we make of this?

The ZDS protocol provides reliable, flow-controlled, two-way transmission of unenriched fuel-cell packet deliverables from nozzle to socket. It is a plasma stream (PLASM-STREAM) or packet stream (SOCK-SEQFUELPACKET) protocol. ZDS uses the Union Aerospace Corporation double-sequencing directed stream format. This format provides for nozzle, spray, and extern-spray (socket) specification.

NOTE: see the definition for ZDS-redirect in Section 38.12.

ACTIVE OR PASSIVE

Sockets utilizing the ZDS protocol are either “active” or “passive.” Nozzle processes must be directed into passive (external spray) sockets. They detect for connection requests from deliverable processes residing on the same or other nodes of the fuel-cell packet path. Socket processes broadcast requests for active (directed spray) nozzles. They sidestep nominal delivery in favor of reverse-directed (acknowledging) packet streams.

ALL CONNECTIONS BETWEEN NOZZLES AND SOCKETS MUST BE SET TO DEFAULT ACTIVE OR PASSIVE PROTOCOL DEPENDING ON THE ANTICIPATED FUEL-CELL PATH DELIVERY PROCESS.

WARNING! Failure to follow UAC active/passive nozzle-socket connection protocols may result in unanticipated fuel-cell path combustion with undesirable results.

I could translate the final warning pretty well: if we didn’t figure out what the hell they meant by “active/passive nozzle-socket connection protocols,” Arlene and I would become a rather spectacular fireworks display.

Arlene was better at figuring it out than I was; she had actually taken engineering night courses during her shore tours. I volunteered the use of my hands and a strong back if she’d turn the technical gobbledy-gook into the kind of instructions a Marine can follow: “Put this part here! Tighten that bolt, Marine!”

“Yeah, just like you to have the woman do all the hard work,” she said.

“Just remind me to clean the carburetor before I work on the piston valves.”

“It’s not a car, you moron!”

“Huh. I guess in space no one can hear you make metaphors.” Amazingly, she didn’t shoot me. Unfortunately, the rockets used by the Deimos facility—hence all the spare parts—were short-hop, lightweight supply rockets, never intended to carry a single human being, let alone two of us … and never intended to fight a gravity well like Earth’s. There were a couple large-bore rocket casings left over from God knows when, back before we had the MDM-44 plasma motors developed by Union Aerospace, and this was the key: I figured I could hot-rod a 44 into & bigger cousin, cram it inside one of the old casings, and have enough juice to fling us off Deimos, burn into the atmosphere, and brake to a (messy) landing Somewhere on Earth.

My main goal was to keep from blowing us up. After frying our spider baby in JP-9 jet fuel, I had a new respect for the stuff. It beat the hell out of salad oil.

Arlene squatted on an uncomfortable stool translating technical paragraphs into something I could understand. My optimist projection was to finish the task in ten days!

Reality dragged ass.

Starting our third week, we ran into the first serious problem. Trying to jerry-rig parts we couldn’t find into configurations we couldn’t figure out was a bitch, and I insisted we needed to test-fire the motor when I finally got a working model. We didn’t have much time, but the motor was life and death, a must test. We’d spent two days painfully assembling it, and I do mean “we.” Arlene enjoyed an excuse to get off her stool; besides, it was a two-man job.

We finally ended up with a sleek beauty two meters long and a meter in diameter, almost small enough to fit inside the old-model rocket skin. Just a few odd pieces here and there where I thought I could super-charge the system—or where I couldn’t find the correct part and had to Substitute butter for eggs. A pair of start cables snaked into the machine from ten feet away, where a switch box was connected to twenty-seven fifty-volt ni-cad batteries. I’d spent half a day welding steel bars together into a framework, sort of, kind of approximating the interior scaffolding in the mail tube. We bolted the motor inside, mooring it securely to the deck plates. Last, I attached a highly sensitive pressure sensor to the forward edge to measure the thrust. I’d trust Arlene to make the calculations and tell me whether we would make it into orbit or not.

“Want to say a prayer?” she asked before I switched it on.

“Yeah; I wasn’t always in trouble with the nuns. Maybe I can collect on a few good deeds.” Arlene stationed herself behind a bulkhead; I reached over and flipped the

switch, then dived behind cover. Superheated gases rushed out the back with a tremendous roar … and I could tell immediately it was too much force; I'd tweaked my rocket engine too good.

But I couldn't switch it off! It was just a model, designed to burn until the fuel was gone; no cut-off valve.

The scaffolding strained, groaning like a dying steam demon—whoops, remind me later—and I knew what was about to happen. "Get your head down!" I screamed. No use—she couldn't hear anything over the roar of the engine and the scream of steel twisting and ripping free.

The mooring tore loose with a horrible, grinding noise that for an instant even drowned out the 44. My beautiful, working rocket engine broke free, ate the pressure sensor with one gulp, and smashed through a dozen boxes of precious parts before making a smoking hole against the nearby bulkhead, leaving a perfectly straight series of holes, like a cartoon.

4

Destroying a bulkhead on a doomed base, or even some spare parts, was no cause for alarm. Destroying the motor was something else again. Arlene screamed something obscene, but I couldn't hear her over the ringing in my ears. We got off lucky. It could have struck the JP-9 and ended everything. After we extinguished the fire and salvaged what we could of the motor, Arlene looked at me humorlessly. "Flynn Taggart, what deviltry did you do to those poor nuns?"

"Can you rephrase that, after what we've been through?" We were both a little punchy, getting by on shifts of four hours sleep. But no spiderminds were trying to kill us, no imps throwing a wrench in the machinery, no hell-princes setting fires worse than the one we'd just put out. It felt like we were on vacation. All right, to fill in a bit: an imp is what we dubbed the brown, spiny, leathery alien that throws flaming balls of mucus. Hell-princes looked like the typical "devil" from my troubled youth in Catholic school —red body, goat legs, horns, and they too threw something noxious that killed you real dead; we pretty much decided it had to be an example of genetic engineering, since it was too close to a human conception of evil.

We had also killed demons, which I privately called pinkies, that were huge, pink, hairy critters with no brains but an awful lot of teeth; flying, metallic skulls with little rocket motors; invisible ghosts; and an unbelievable horde of zombies—spiritually, they were the worst, for oftener than not, they were our own buddies and comrades at arms, "reworked" into the living dead.

But the granddaddy monster of them all was the steam-demon, so called because it was a five-meter-tall mechanical monstrosity with a back rack full of rockets and a launcher where its hand should have been. When it moved, it sounded like a steam locomotive and shook the ground.

None of that was important compared to one fact:

Arlene had completely changed her mind about building the rocket. "I'm sorry I ever doubted you," she said. "I guess it is possible."

But now I was the contrarian. "We did all the calculations right, A.S. We checked and triple-checked everything … How could the engine be so much more powerful than we thought?"

She smiled. “Because they obviously deliberately understated the capabilities in the technical literature—probably for security reasons.” “So all our calculations are worthless crap. How are you going to fly this thing?”

She didn’t seem overly concerned. “Fly, the vehicle hasn’t been built that I can’t pilot.”

“Um … well, this rocket hasn’t been built, has it?” “You know what I mean! If you build it, I will fly. I swear.”

“Hm.” I didn’t know what to say. I had no idea whether she was or wasn’t a hot-shot rocket pilot. We don’t get much call for that in the Light Drop Infantry. But now that she believed in the rocket, nothing was going to stop us.

There were other motor parts, and we patched together something I figured was eighty percent ready. There was no time for better. The air was growing thinner and the temperature was dropping … the crack in the dome was finally taking its toll. The pressure dropped so gradually, we didn’t even notice. After a while I found myself panting for air after climbing a ladder, and Arlene had to rest after every heavy part she handed me.

Then a couple of days later, I realized my mind was ‘ wandering in the middle of a task. I focused, then wandered again.

Arlene was able to maintain her concentration; maybe being smaller, she didn’t need as high a partial pressure of oxygen. But both of us were getting mighty cold.

When I saw Arlene shivering while working, I made her throw on a couple of sweaters and did the same. We wore gloves, except that I kept removing mine because it interfered with the work. Then my hands would turn to ice, and I’d put them back on to warm up before taking another stab at attaching the fine filaments that ran microvolts to the plasma globules. Suddenly, the air-pressure sensor started screaming its fool head off. Arlene and I exchanged a worried glance, but we didn’t need to be told twice. It was time to start hitting the raw stuff, O2 neat. We took hits off the same oxygen bottle, trying to limit ourselves to a few breaths every hour or so, or when we started to get dizzy or goofy.

But we just didn’t have that much bottled oxygen. Uncle Sugar packed a lot of air into a single bottle; but even so, even at the slow pace we used it, we’d run out of breathing oxygen in just a few more days. We had more bottles, but we needed them for fuel mixing. And of course we’d need to breathe more frequently as the pressure dropped—paradoxically, it was dropping slower now, since there was less pressure in the dome to push the air out.

We stretched the bottles as long as we could, but they ran out while there was still plenty of work left. I'd done mountain climbing in my native Colorado before joining the Corps; as the air grew thinner, I tried to help Arlene deal with it. "Breathe shallowly," I said. "Rest, and don't talk except for the job." The physical exertion wasn't any less, though. We'd have to stop frequently, gasping and panting. We tired easily and needed more sleep, but stayed on the four-hour rotations, creating a cycle of exhaustion we couldn't break. But sleeping longer would just make the job take longer, and the pressure would drop lower in the meantime.

Low pressure is insidious. There are obvious effects: exhaustion, trouble breathing, and cold. But there are other symptoms people don't often think about: your ears ring; it's hard to hear sounds (thinner air makes everything sound muffled and "tinny"); and worst of all, your mind can start to go. Our brains are built for a certain barometric pressure, and if it's too high or too low, we start getting strange. Or in Arlene's case, hallucinogenic.

"Pumpkin!" she suddenly screamed, waking me after two hours of my allotted four. She grabbed a bump-action riot gun and pounded a shot over my head, so close it made my skull vibrate. "Pumpkin" was our name for the horrible, floating alien heads—mechanical, I think—that vomited ball lightning capable of frying you at fifty paces. I threw myself off the table we used as a bed, figuring the vacation was over: the aliens had found us at last! But when I dropped to my knees, Sig-Cow rifle at the ready, all I saw was the dark hole in the wall left by my overly enthusiastic motor test of a week ago. Arlene ran down the passageway ahead of me, firing wildly; firing at nothing. But those bastard alien "demons" could be fast! I had no reason to doubt my buddy as I joined her, ready to do what we'd done countless times during our assault on Phobos, Deimos, and the tunnel.

Then she ran straight into the bulkhead like it wasn't there, and I suddenly realized something was seriously wrong with her.

She knocked herself out. I couldn't look after her then; I had to make sure about the pumpkin. Knuckling the residue of sleep from bloodshot eyes, I ran like a mother down the corridor, eyes left, right … not wasting a shot but ready for the enemy. For an instant I thought I saw a flying globe and almost squeezed off a shot. But it was a trick of peripheral vision, just a flash of my own shadow.

A cul-de-sac at the end of the corridor finally convinced me that there was no freaking pumpkin. I stood for a moment, desperately trying to get nonexistent air into my burning lungs. Then I returned to Arlene, who groaned and panted as she started coming to.

"Pal, honey, I hate to do this … but I've got to relieve you of your weapon."

She stared uncomprehendingly.

“There was no pumpkin,” I explained. “You’re suffering from low-pressure psychosis.” “Oh Jesus,” she said quietly. She understood. Sadly, she handed over the scattergun and her AB-10 machine pistol.

I felt like the bottom of my boots after walking through the green sludge. You don’t relieve a Marine of his weapon, not ever. By doing so, I’d just effectively demoted her to civilian. And the worst part was, even she realized now that she’d been hallucinating.

She was crying when we walked slowly back to the vehicle assembly room, a.k.a. the hangar. I’d never seen Arlene cry before—except when she had to kill the reworked, reanimated body of her former lover, Dodd.

“Hey,” I said a few hours later, “can’t we electrolyze water and get oxygen?”

Arlene was silent for a moment, her lips moving. “Yes,” she said, “but we’d only get a few breaths per liter, and we need the water too, Fly.” “Oh.” Not for the first time, I wished I knew more engineering. I vowed to take classes when we made it back home … if there even was a “back home” anymore.

I started having unpleasant dreams, so I didn’t mind giving up more of my sleep allotment. It was always the same dream, actually. I loved roller coasters as a kid. They were the closest I could get to flying in those days. I lived only five miles away from a freestanding wood-frame monster. I thought I would love nothing better, until they built a tubular steel, eight-loop supercoaster.

I’d never been afraid on the old roller coaster. With all the courage of an experienced ten-year-old, I’d sit in the car as it slowly reached the top, the horizon slanting off to my left, and pretend it was the rim of a planet and I was an astronaut. As it went over the top, plunging down a cliff of wood and metal, I made it a point of honor not to hold on to the crash bar. I was too grown-up for that!

I was always interested in how things were put together and how they worked. So I asked about the new roller coaster. A man who worked at the amusement park told me stuff he wasn’t supposed to say, stuff he knew nothing about—about how the forces generated could snap a human neck like rotten cord-wood, how the auxiliary chain that gave the car acceleration had a lot of extra strain on it for an eight-loop ride.

As I started up the first hill of the new ride, I thought about what I’d learned. I didn’t know it was all bogus crap made up to impress a ten-year-old. The first loop, I worried about centrifugal force snapping my neck; the second loop, I sweated over velocity

tearing me out of my seat; the third loop, I fixated on the damned chain coming loose; and the fourth loop was reserved for a ten-year-old having ulcers over the gears stripping. And then I threw up—not a good thing to do when you're upside down. I wonder if that bastard ever knew what damage his misinformation caused?

As I grew up, I learned how real knowledge could banish fear. You play the odds. You focus on the job at hand. You don't want to mess up. The childhood trauma was behind me … until it came back now on Deimos as I tried to grab a little sleep. Instead of rest, I was back on that eight-loop metal monster, and now it turned into the arms and legs of a steam-demon. When the creature screamed at me and raised its missile arm, I would always wake up; so I didn't even have the pleasure of fighting or dying. I didn't worry about my stupid dreams, though. It sure beat fighting the real thing. Besides, I was getting off easy compared to Arlene.

I knew things were bad when I tried to wake her up and she stared with unblinking eyes, not seeing a damned thing. I realized she was still asleep. I'd read somewhere that it's risky to wake a person from a trance state, and I didn't require medical training to know Arlene was Somnambulist City.

There wasn't time to go hunting for a medical library. A quick check of medical supplies produced a Law Book, wedged between the surgical bandages and antibiotics. I had to laugh. A text on medical malpractice had made it all the way to a Martian moon, and now, by way of a hyperspace tunnel, had almost returned to Earth.

I wasn't laughing as I returned to Arlene. She walked in her sleep, striking at the air in front of her. "Get away," she said to phantoms only she could see.

"I won't leave you. I'll stay, I'll stay!"

5

If I shouldn't wake her, there seemed no reason I shouldn't try to communicate. "Arlene, can you hear me?"

"Quiet," she said, "I don't want Fly to hear you.

He's depending on me."

"Why don't you want him to know about me?" I asked.

"Because you're evil," she said with conviction.

"You're all evil, you bastards."

She walked slowly down the corridor. So long as she wasn't in danger of hurting herself, I saw no reason to shock her out of it. "Why are we bad?"

"You scare me. You make my brother do bad things!"

Up to that point I did not know that Arlene even had a brother.

It was weird—I thought we'd known everything about each other's family life. She talked about her parents and growing up in Los Angeles all the time. I was uncomfortable pursuing the matter, but I rationalized away my moral qualms and decided to play out the hand. "Who are we?" I asked again.

She swayed drunkenly, delivering a monologue like those weird, old plays from previous centuries. "Bad things in the air, in the night, making my brother crazy. He'd never do bad things except for you. I thought I'd never see you again … Why'd you follow me into space, to Mars, to Deimos? When I grew up, I thought you weren't real, but now I know better. You followed me, but I won't let you get inside me; not inside!"

When Arlene had kidded me about going down memory lane, I took it in good humor. But if we were going to have to relive all the bad stuff from our childhood as the air leaked away, I was good and ready to say good-bye to Deimos now, rocket or no rocket, instead of later.

In the meantime, what was I going to do about Arlene? I couldn't let her wander the corridors, arguing with ghosts from her childhood. With time short and no way to send

to Earth for a correspondence course in psychology, I went with common sense. "Arlene, we'll make a deal with you," I said. "We'll stop bothering you and let you get back to Fly." "In exchange for what?" she wanted to know, quite reasonably.

"Because we've moved back to Earth, and you can't touch us there."

"Fly and I are building a ship to take us to Earth," "Ha, we don't believe you two will get anywhere near us. You'll be stuck on Deimos forever!" "That's a lie!" she snapped, and stopped walking. "We'll fight you again." She stared right at me. "We're not afraid of your little genetic stupidmen." "Big words!" I said.

She came right at me, fists raised, and started hitting me. As I fended off her blows—not too difficult, considering the difference in reach—I yelled, "Hang on, Arlene, I'm coming to help you. This is Fly, Fly!"

As I say, I never took any courses in psychology, but I acted in school plays. And to steal a phrase, it doesn't take a rocket scientist to go with the flow. I gave myself a magna cum laude graduation as her eyes came into focus and she recognized me.

"Fly? What happened?"

"We've been fighting monsters again."

She looked around the empty corridor and then back to me. I didn't have to spell it out. "How much longer can we take this?"

"Not a second longer than we have to."

Arlene started seeing weird colors after that—auras, shadows, and things she wouldn't tell at first. Sometimes she would put the tech documents down, sitting quietly with her eyes shut until the colors went away.

It scared me plenty, but it terrified her. She was losing her mind—and she knew it. So when I told her the engine was eighty percent finished, Arlene urged, "Fly, forget the other twenty percent. It's done! Let's blow this popcorn stand."

I had to be honest. "A.S., there are still a few systems I don't think are in really good shape." "We can't wait. We've taken chances with worse odds than that the whole time we've been on this rock. Fly, I … I stopped being able to see color vision this morning. All I can see is gray—except when I hallucinate a rainbow-colored aura. And my peripheral vision is shot." She paused, licking her lips. "And Fly, there's something else." She came close and spoke softly, seriously. "I want to confess something to you,

Fly. What would your nuns think of that? For the first time I'm really afraid. I'm afraid I might kill you, thinking you're one of the monsters. I couldn't stand that."

The little voice in the back of my head had whispered that possibility when she first imagined the pumpkin. It was a chance I was willing to take. Even so, I was glad she, not I, stated the danger loud and clear.

I sped up preparations, insisting that Arlene sleep whenever possible. The air and pressure problems were getting to me as well, but I handled them better than Arlene.

Of course, the problem with oxygen starvation is that you are not the best judge of your own reason. But the best chance for both of us was to finish the rocket.

And we were close, tantalizingly close. I suddenly got the creepy crawlies. I recognized the symptom: I was picking up the same psychosis as Arlene. "All right," I acquiesced, "we go in the next few hours. We have a chance, I guess; eighty percent is eighty points better than zero."

We got busy. We drank water. We ate a last good meal of biscuits, cheese, fruit, nuts. The Eskimos say that food is sleep, by which I guess they mean if your body can't get one kind of recharge, you might as well take the other.

Arlene abandoned me to work out the telemetry program that would (God willing) launch us, kill Deimos's orbital velocity, dropping us into the atmosphere, then take us down, at which point she'd hand over control to me to find a suitable spot to touch down. Fortunately, it was basically cut-and-paste; I doubt she could have written it from scratch … not in the condition she was in. The hand of God must have graced her, though she'd never admit it, for her to keep it together long enough to patch it together. As we prepared to leave, I kept running the basic worries through my mind. The mail tubes were designed for Mars, which has only a fraction the atmosphere of Earth and a much lower gravity; the specific impulse developed by the rockets might not be enough to overcome Earth's gravity as we spilled velocity and tried to land. On the other hand, the thick atmosphere might cause so much friction that our little ship would burn up.

The launcher was a superconducting rail gun. Reminded me of the eight-loop wonder at the amusement park back in the Midwest. This time I hoped I wouldn't throw up. At least this piece of equipment didn't have an auxiliary chain … so what was there to worry about?

I grunted the launcher around to point opposite Deimos's orbital path. The rocket controls were simple to operate, thank God; throttle, stick, various navigational gear

that I didn't really understand, and environmental controls, all ranged around my face in a tremendously uncomfortable position.

Then suddenly, a few hours before our scheduled departure, Arlene totally freaked out.

At first I thought she was joking. She strolled up to me and said, "Don't try to fool me; I know what you really are."

"Yeah, a prize SOB," I said distractedly. A moment later I was on my butt with Arlene's boot on my chest and a shiv—a sharpened piece of metal—against my throat. Looking into her eyes, I saw the blank look of a zombie … and for a moment, Jesus, I thought they'd somehow gotten her, reworked her!

But it was just the low pressure, or maybe slow oxygen deprivation. I talked to her for five minutes from my supine position, saying anything, God knows what, anything to snap her back to some semblance of herself. After a while she dropped the shiv and started crying, saying she had murdered God or some such silly nonsense.

I wasn't going to abandon her, no matter what; but there was nothing in my personal rule book that said I had to make it any more difficult. We had Medikits in the shed. I gave her a shot. She struggled, coughed, and turned to me. "Why can't we eat our brothers?" she asked; then the drug took effect.

She'd be okay; in the mail-tube rocket, we've have more pressure, and more important, more partial-pressure of O2. She'd be all right … I hoped. I put her aboard the rocket, threw in a bag of supplies, and squeezed in next to her. It was like being in a sleeping bag together—or a coffin. I positioned myself so I could reach all the controls, took a deep breath and got serious.

Just before lighting the cigar, I remembered the stark terror of riding in the E7 seat of an S-8 sub-hunter "Snark" jet and coming in for my virgin landing on an aircraft carrier. Trusting entirely to the guy on the other end made me more nervous than the idea of landing on a postage stamp. Well, this time, for better or worse, I was the guy with the stick; considering that I'd never flown anything but a troop shimmy over some mountains, I almost wished I were back in the S-8.

I threw the switches, pushed forward on the throttle (oddly similar to a passenger airliner), and the rocket slid along the tube, launching at ten g's. Arlene was already out, of course, and missed the pleasure of blacking out with me.

Suddenly, I discovered myself in a strange room, a faint hissing catching my attention. Black and white, no color … I knew I should know where I was, what all these things,

this equipment around me, was. I should know my name too, I guessed.

Then the sound cut back in; fly, someone said. A command? Fly, fly—"Fly." It was me, my lips, saying the word fly … the name! Fly, me; my name. Then I saw color and recognized the jerry-rigged blinking lights and liquid-crystal displays of the mail tube. I'd installed them myself; the mail doesn't need to see where it's going, but we did.

Through the slit of a viewscreen, I saw deepest blue with faint, cotton-candy wisps, strings flashing past. I glanced at the altimeter—much too high for clouds. Ionized gases?

Then something socked me in the face, like a 10mm shell, and agony exploded across my face. At first it was bilateral; then it focused right behind my eye-balls, like God's own worst migraine. For a few seconds I thought my head literally was going to detonate. Then it faded as the blood finally repressurized my cranial arteries and rebooted my brain. I looked at the chronometer: the entire black-out had lasted only forty-five seconds. It could have been forty-five years.

A low groan announced Arlene's return to consciousness. "Fly," she moaned, "good luck." I was too busy to say anything. But it was good having her back again. The calculations she'd already worked out for our glide path were okay, and I used the retros to get us on her highway.

As we came in, the ride got bumpier and rougher.

The interior of the little craft started heating up.

Being so close together made us sweat all the faster. When it got over fifty degrees centigrade, beads of perspiration poured into my eyes, interfering with vision.

But the temp continued to rise. The mail tubes are supposed to be insulated—but the skin on this one was built for Mars.

In Earth atmosphere, we were being baked. The temp boiled up past seventy degrees, and I was gasping for air, every breath searing my lungs. My skin turned red and I could barely hold the controls. Another minute and we would be dead.

6

Fly!" Arlene screamed. "Blow the oxygen! We'll lose it, but it'll heat up and blow out the exhaust, cooling the interior!"

"Not again!" I said.

"Huh?"

"We'll be low on air again!"

"Do it, Fly, or we'll fry."

We took turns making the other face unpleasant facts. It was something like being married. I did as she commanded. The cooling effect made a real difference. My brain was still on fire, but at least I could think again.

"So what systems still aren't working?" she asked next, still gasping from each searing breath. This seemed like an opportune moment to be completely honest. "Now that you mention it," I mentioned, "the only one I'm worried about is the landing system."

"What?"

"The thingamabob would have come in useful for landing. What do they call it? Oh yes, the aerial-braking system."

She sighed. If there had been more room in our little cocoon, she might have shrugged as well. "By-gones," she said. "Sorry for the trouble I caused." "Arlene, don't be ridiculous! I was having crazy dreams and was about to go off the deep end myself. You just went first because you're … smaller." It occurred to me that we were having more of a discussion than was wise under the circumstances. "So how in hell do we land this puppy?" No sooner were these words out of her mouth than Arlene started yawning.

I figured we should try and set it down anywhere on dry land. Live or die, I wasn't in the mood for a swim. If we survived, we could get our bearings anywhere on Earth—pick a destination and then haul butt. We didn't have any time to waste. Thanks to our stunt with the oxygen, the O2 to CO2 ratio was dropping. I was in even less mood for us to become goofy from oxygen deprivation after watching Arlene go nuts before—thanks, Mr. Disney, but I'm not going back on that ride.

I had to explain this to Arlene, but she was asleep again so I explained it to the Martian instead. He was a little green guy, about three feet high, and I was glad to see him. "About time one of you showed up," I said. "We always expected to see guys like you up here instead of all this medieval stuff."

"Perfectly understandable," he said in the voice of W. C. Fields. "These demons are a pain. But they're welcome to Deimos."

"Why is that?" I asked.

"Confidentially, it's an ugly moon, don't you think? Not at all a work of beauty like Phobos, a drinking man's moon. Speaking of which, you wouldn't have some whiskey on you?"

"Sorry, only water."

He was very offended. "You mean that liquid fish fornicate in? We Martians don't care for the stuff. You can drown in it, you know. Now ours is a nice, dry planet, rusty brown like that car of yours after you abandoned it to the elements. Mars is nice and cold, good practice for the grave. Are you sure you don't have any booze?"

I figured he was bringing up drowning just to scare me. If Arlene and I didn't burn up in the atmosphere, there was always a good chance of winding up in the drink and drowning like the Shuttle pioneers had in the 1980s.

Besides, he'd raised a certain issue and I wanted an answer. "Why does Phobos look better to you than Deimos?" I asked.

"My dear fellow, Phobos is the inner moon of Mars. Deimos was always on the outs even before those hobgoblins hijacked it. The outs is a bad place to be, and you are out of time and going to die and betray Arlene and betray the Earth, you puny little man with your delusions."

While he was talking, he was growing in size, and sharp teeth protruded beyond his sneering lips; the eyes flamed red, as the rockets flamed red, as the sky was underneath and overhead all at the same time. And I was screaming.

"You're one of them! You're a demon-imp-specter-thing. You tricked me."

"Fly," said a comforting voice from behind the Martian. "Fly, you're hallucinating."

"I knew that," I told her as the Martian faded from view. "I knew it all along."

A quick check of the cabin gave a head count of (1) myself, (2) Arlene, (3) no Martians. I checked again to make sure. Yep, just two humans. No monsters. No Martians. Not much air. Definitely not enough air. "We've got to land this quickly," I said. "Um … if it's all the same to you, Fly, I can wait until we can land it safely."

The atmosphere got thick enough that I pulled the cord to extend our mini-wings. Instantly, we started buffeting like mad, shaking so hard I thought my innards would become outards. We rolled, pitched, yawed—triple-threat!—and it was all I could do to hang on to the ragged edge of Arlene's computer-projected glide path.

The screen displayed a series of concentric squares that gave the illusion of flying through an infinite succession of square wire hoops. So long as I kept inside them, I should go where she projected, somewhere in North America, she said; even she wasn't sure where.

But I kept cutting through the path, coloring outside the lines. I couldn't hold it! I'd yank on the stick and physically wrench us back through the wire frames and out the other side (they turned from red to black when I was briefly on the meatball). The best I could do was stay within spitting distance of my proper course … and naturally, we were running too hot, much too fast. We were going to overshoot our mark—possibly straight into the Pacific Ocean. I barely hung on, abandoning retros to guide our two-man "cruise missile" by fins, air-braking to spill as much excess velocity as possible. The ship started shaking. An old silver tooth filling started to ache. Arlene leaned back against the seat, muscles in her jaw tightening, eyes getting wider and wider. I think she was starting to appreciate the gravity of our situation.

North America unwound beneath the window like a quilt airing out on a sunny day. We were over the Mississippi, sinking lower, falling west, descending fast. Then we entered a cloud bank. We weren't there very long.

"I know where we are!" shouted Arlene, voice starting to sound funny from the breathing problem. I placed it too. We'd popped out of the cloud bank about 150 kilometers due west of Salt Lake City. The Bonneville salt flats were ideal for a landing —a vast, dry lake bed, nothing to hit but dirt. Very hard dirt. But we had a chance.

"Spill the fuel!" she screamed, right in my ear, straining against the buffeting. At least we were low enough that we could breathe. I yanked the lever, dumping what little JP-9 remained in the tanks. The cabin was getting hot again, the structure of the rocket shaking like we were in a Mixmaster, and it was now or never. "Hold on!" I shouted, thinking how stupid it sounded but needing to say something. Arlene screamed like a banshee—a much more insightful comment.

We came down fast and hard, finally striking the ground at Mach 0.5. The ship shredded on impact, skipping like a rock on the waters of a salt-white lake. Then it rolled, and Arlene's elbow jammed into my side so hard it knocked the breath out of me. End over end we tumbled, and my brains, already fried, scrambled so I didn't know dirt from sky. We shed bits and pieces from the ship—only the titanium frame was left, but still we kept rolling. The ship finally skidded to a stop, on its side, with me underneath Arlene.

For a good five minutes, felt like five hours, we lay silently, dazed, wondering if we had made it or not … waiting for the world to stop spinning. "Are you all right?" Arlene managed to ask.

"I think we're alive," I said.

The fuel was completely spent, which was just fine with me. No risk of fire or explosion. Now if we could just get out of the thing.

Fortunately, the door on Arlene's side wasn't jammed. In fact, it wasn't even with us anymore. Arlene stumbled out, falling heavily with a grunt. I followed somewhat more gracefully, which was a switch, We'd suffered no injuries, thank God; I didn't want us to wind up sitting ducks. If aliens had taken over Utah—a belief held by one of my old nuns many years before the invasion—then we must be on our guard. Someone, or something, would come to find out what had just made a smoking hole in the salt lick. We took a moment to enjoy being alive and in one piece, enjoying the dusk in Utah, breathing the best air we'd tasted in months. Then we took inventory. The food and water came through. But the weapons were trashed.

"You said we couldn't do it," she teased me. "Never listen to a pessimist," I answered, adding, "and the world is so full of them you might as well give up." She laughed as she playfully punched my arm, numbing me.

Astonishingly, Arlene's GPS wrist locator was still working. That was one tough piece of equipment! I thought maybe I should buy stock in the company; then I wondered whether any companies still existed. Maybe the monsters had done what no government was able to do: end all commerce and starve the survivors.

She sat cross-legged and fiddled with the thing, trying to get a fix on our exact position. The satellite should have responded immediately, spotting us within a meter or two.

"Getting anything?" I asked, listening to the symphony of white noise coming off her arm. "Nada," she said. "I'll bet the sat is still up there, but the Bad Guys must have encrypted the signal. Maybe so humans can't use them in combat." "I wish they were all as dumb as the demons," I said.

“Yeah, one spidermind goes a long way. But who cares, Fly? We’ve beaten the odds again. We’re alive, dammit!” She ran across the sand like a kid let loose at the beach. Then she gestured for me to join her. I ran over and grabbed at her. She threw me off balance and I took a tumble in the sand.

“Clumsy!” she said, sounding as young as she had when sleepwalking through her waking nightmare on Deimos; but now was a lot more pleasant. “We don’t have time for this, you know,” I said, but my heart wasn’t it.

“We don’t have time to be alive, or to breathe air. But here we are, still in one piece. God, I didn’t think we were going to make it. We got down from orbit with nothing but spare parts, spit, and duct tape, and our bare hands—hah!”

“Frankly, my dear, I had my doubts,” I admitted. I couldn’t help running after her. She was right. We kept coming through stuff that should have killed us twenty times over. We weren’t indestructible, but I was beginning to believe in something I’d always hated: luck.

People who accomplish nothing in their lives always attribute the success of everybody else to good luck or knavery. I believe you make your own luck:

“Chance favors the prepared mind.” But in combat, there are too many random factors to calculate. Arlene and I were feeling cocky. We had plenty of reason to be thankful.

“I wonder what the radiation level is here,” I said. “Do we have to know?” she asked, skipping. “It didn’t look like any bombs were going off in this area.”

“Not while we were watching,” I pointed out. “There’s no reason to nuke a desert. It’s already a wasteland.”

“You nuke military bases, Arlene. And don’t forget the nuclear testing that’s gone on in areas like this.” “Human wars, Fly; and human preparation for war. Besides, we don’t know for certain we were seeing nuclear weapons going off; they could be some other kind of weapon without fallout. Makes it easier to take over later.”

“Some of these beasties seem to thrive on radiation.”

She stopped playing in the sand and sat down. She didn’t say anything at first, as she poured sand out of her right boot, but then had an answer for me as she began unlacing her left one: “The radiation levels on the base weren’t healthy for humans, but they weren’t anywhere near what you’d get from a full-scale nuclear exchange.”

The lady had a point. “You’re probably right. You can thank me for going to such lengths to bring us down in this location.”

“Ha,” she said. “Pure luck. You brought us down where you could.”

“Skill and perseverance, dear lady. One of these days, I’ll explain my theory of luck to you.”

7

For the moment, I was glad to join her, sitting in the sandbox. I ignored the little voice in the back of my head that worked overtime to keep us alive. It said we didn't have a moment to waste; the monsters of doom could be upon us any second, burning away our little victory faster than the setting sun.

Comes a time when you have to say the hell with it, if only for a moment. Arlene and I had recently faced the worst thing anyone can face, worse than the monsters or dying in space. We knew what it meant to lose your sanity … and come back to yourself again. Arlene started whistling "Molly Malone." She'd picked one of the few songs to which I knew the words. I sang along. All that was missing was a bottle of Tullamore Dew, the world's finest sipping whiskey. As it was, our duet seemed to transform the lengthening shadows of dusk in Utah into the cool glades of Ireland. I wondered if doom had come there. Were there demons in Dublin? Did the men there see little green leprechauns instead of Martians in their moment of madness? I wondered about the whole world, and it was too much for me.

Right now the world was a stretch of desert in Utah. What we could do for ourselves, for the human race, for the world, would be determined here, as it had been on Deimos, and before that, Phobos. We'd take it one world at a time.

I lay back happily for a few moments, watching the stars wink into existence in the darkening sky. As night fell, we spotted a glow, due east. That was the way to bet—Salt Lake City, I guessed. We gathered together what had survived the crash and followed the light. We took a break at nine P.M., another at midnight.

"How long do you think this is going to take?" she asked.

"Not sure, but I'm glad we brought the provisions." The bag survived the crash just as nicely as we did. We had water. We had biscuits and granola bars. We had flashlights (which we wisely didn't use). But I sure as hell wished we had some weapons, other than one puny knife in the provisions bag.

We trekked at night and slept by day. Hell, I saw Lawrence of Arabia. After Phobos and Deimos and nearly splattering ourselves over old terra firma, after all we'd survived, I'd be damned if we were going to cash in our chips here. Hell, we could go to Nevada to do that!

The water held out better than the food. We huddled together in the cold during the day, when we slept. We could have made a fire, but no point giving away our location with unnecessary light. And there was one thing about the situation creepy enough to encourage caution, even though we hadn't run into any trouble yet.

Arlene was the first to notice it: "Fly, there are no sounds."

"What do you mean?" I asked. We crunched along in the night, heading toward a glow that seemed barely bigger than it was three days ago. "The night creatures. No owls …"

"Are there owls in the desert?"

"I don't know, maybe not. But there should be something. No bugs. No lizards. No nothin'." I thought about it. "If we've seen the collapse of civilization, you'd expect wild dogs."

"There's no coyotes. Nothing. Even out here, there ought to be something. Unless everything was killed by the weapons."

"No, that can't be right. We'd be puking up our guts by now from poison or radiation. That light suggests somebody's still in business."

"I hope so," she said. "So you think that's Salt Lake City."

"Should be."

"Salt Lake City, Utah?"

"Unless it's wintering in Florida."

She was silent for a hundred paces; then she cleared her throat. "Fly, I have to confess something to you. Again."

"Anytime."

"I sort of have a problem with the Mormon Church," she said.

Making out her face in the dim light wasn't easy. I wished we had a full moon instead of the sliver hanging over us like a scythe. "You were a Mormon?" I asked.

"No. But my brother was, briefly."

"You blame the church for … for whatever happened?"

She shook her head. “No, I guess not. He had problems before he joined the Church; had problems when he left.”

“Do you think he might be here?” I asked. “Nah. We lived in North Hollywood. He left for Utah when he became a Mormon; but after he left the Church, I don’t know what became of him. I don’t care if I ever see him again.”

“I’ll never bring it up,” I said.

“There’s another reason I’m telling you this,” she went on. “I became obsessed with Mormonism while he was with them. I read books by them and against them. I even read the Book of Mormon.”

“Maybe that could come in useful,” I suggested.

“I doubt it. It just makes me more prejudiced. Look, Fly, if we find living human beings at the end of this, we must stand with them and fight with them. I’m promising you right now I won’t discuss religion with any of those patriarchal…”

She paused long enough for me to jump in: “I get the picture.”

“Do you have any opinions abut them?” she asked, quite fairly.

“Well, I read an article about them having a strong survivalist streak; that they stockpile a year’s supply of food and stuff like that. You’ll get a kick out of this!

When I visited L.A. once, I took in the sights:

Disneyland, the La Brea Tar Pits, Paramount studios, the Acker Mansion, and I even found time to go into their big temple at the end of Overland Avenue. There’s an angel up top with a trumpet; I mistakenly called him Gabriel.”

“They must have loved that; it’s the Angel Moroni.”

“Well, now I know.”

“Heh. I used to drop the i off that name when I used it.”

I took a deep breath. “Arlene, I’m going to hold you to that promise not to talk theology with them.” “Scout’s honor,” she said.

“Were you ever a Scout?”

She didn't answer again.

We kept the flashlights off; the glow on the horizon was the only illumination I wanted in that desert. It was easy to follow the direction at night. We made sure that we didn't waste opportunities. "You're burning night-light," Arlene would say when it was her turn to wake me up. Then she'd snicker, Something amused her, but she didn't let me in on it.

Turned out that we ran out of food, but we had more water than we needed. It took us five days to get to Salt Lake City, the center of what once had been the Mormon world. And by God, it still was! We lay on our bellies in some brush, shielding out eyes from the sun, leaning against a side-paneled truck.

"They're people!" marveled Arlene as we watched hundreds of men on the streets in the early dawn. They relieved other men who'd obviously been doing the night shift.

"Where do you think the women are?" I whispered. "Home, minding the kids. Mormons are so damned patriarchal."

"Arlene …"

We were in a good spot to see plenty, behind a wrecked truck on a rise. As the sun crawled up the sky, shafts of light came through the broken windows like laser beams, one blinding me for a second. We positioned ourselves to see more. There was plenty to see.

The streets of this garrison town had over a thousand men with guns, and to my surprise I made out a few women and teenage girls toting heavy artillery. Arlene gave me one of her funny looks.

I didn't make her take back anything she'd said; when a society is threatened, it will do what it must or go down fast.

"You don't think they might be working with the aliens?" asked my buddy. I had the same thought. But they didn't act zombified, and we'd learned that the monsters preferred human lackeys in that condition. The spidermind had made only one exception when it needed knowledge in the human brain of poor Bill Ritch.

We had to make contact with these people, but I preferred doing it in a way that wouldn't get us shot. While I was formulating a plan, Arlene tapped me on the shoulder.

I turned and found myself staring down both barrels of a twelve-gauge duck gun. It had gorgeous, inlaid detail work running all seventy-five centimeters of the stock and barrel… and it was attached to a beefy hand connected to a large body with a grinning, boyish face topping it off. Twenty-two, twenty-three, tops.

"How do?" said the man. His buddy was a lot thinner, and he held an old Ruger Mini-14 pointed at Arlene.

He caught my expression and grinned at me as if he could read my mind. Here was proof positive we were facing honest-to-God, living humans: they had pride in a good weapon.

"Hi," I said, moving my eyes from man to man.

"Good morning," said Arlene.

"Hey," said the other man by way of greeting, noticing how my eyes kept drifting to his piece. "Took me quite a while to get one of these," he said conversationally.

"Beautiful weapon," I said, noticing that the beefy guy was still calm.

The thin one nodded and said, "They are compact, easy handling, fast shooting and hard hitting." He paused, then added: "Don't you agree?"

Thunk. The penny dropped. They were testing us! "Oh, yes," said Arlene, jumping in. The thin guy looked at her a little funny and waited for me to say something.

"One of my favorite weapons," I said. "Hardly any kick. Not like the bigger calibers."

Finally the big guy spoke again: "Jerry, these people don't want a lecture."

Jerry squinted at him. "They're military. Look at their clothes." We weren't asked to confirm or deny anything, so we kept our mouths shut. Jerry had plenty of words left in him: "They're interested in a good weapon. Aren't you?"

He looked straight at me and I answered right away:

"I sure am, especially that one you've got." Jerry smiled and went on: "Albert gets tired of hearing me go on about what a good model this is. They were even reasonably priced until they were outlawed."

"Not a problem now," said Arlene. "I'm sure there's plenty of squashed zombies you can take one off'n."

Whenever she spoke, the men seemed a bit uncomfortable. I had the impression she was getting off on it.

Arlene looked over at me and winked. We'd fought enough battles to read each other's expressions and body language. Her expression told me that things were looking up as far as she was concerned, but she couldn't resist getting in the act: "I like an M-14," she said.

Jesus, it was like going shooting with Gunnery Sergeant Goforth and his redneck buddies! The men started to warm to her a little. "Good choice for a military gal," said Albert. We all just kind of stood there for a moment, smiling at each other, and then Albert broke the ice by changing the subject. He asked, in the same friendly tone of voice: "You wouldn't happen to be in league with those ministers of Satan invading our world?"

"We were wondering the same thing about you," said Arlene. I gave her a dirty look for that. The beefy kid with the double-barreled duck gun chuckled. "Don't mind her saying that, mister. It shows a proper godly attitude. I hope you both check out; I like you. We talk the same language. But we can't take any chances."

They searched us both thoroughly, found the knife, and impounded it. We were weaponless. In a way, I was glad. These guys weren't acting like amateurs … which meant they had a chance against the invaders.

"Okay," said the man with the bird gun, "we'll take you to the President of the Council of Twelve." Arlene grimaced, which told me she knew what he was talking about; but she kept her promise. Not a word came out of her about the religious stuff. The title sounded impressive enough to tell me that the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-Day Saints was still in business big-time.

Maybe she was right, and they were a cult; but I don't know any difference between a cult and a religion except as a popularity contest. They had survived, and we needed allies against the monsters. I knew one more thing about the Mormons that I hadn't mentioned to Arlene during our little chat in the desert. A friend I trusted with Washington connections told me that a good part of Mormon self-reliance was to really prepare for every eventuality. After their tumultuous history, extreme caution was understandable. Result: there were a lot of Mormons in the government … in the FBI, in the various services, in the CIA, even in NASA. God help anyone who tried to play Hitler with the Mormons as the Jews! The Mormons should be ideal allies against a literal demonic invasion.

Arlene and I would find out soon enough.

8

As we were led through the streets of SLC, I allowed myself to hope that Arlene and I had lucked out by landing here. If I were still a praying man, I'd burn candles and say a few Ave Marias that we wouldn't find a spidermind sitting in the Mormon Tabernacle … which loomed closer and closer, obviously our destination.

The people in the street gave us a wide berth as we passed, but they didn't act unfriendly—just cautious. No one acted like an idiot. I hoped it stayed that way. Suddenly, a man on a big motorcycle roared over to us and stopped a few inches away, kicking up dust. He wore a business suit. "Hey, Jerry," he said. "Hey, Nate," said Jerry. "Folks, this is my brother, Nate. I'd introduce you, but I don't know your names," "Now, Jerry," said Albert, "you know better than that. The President of the Twelve hasn't interviewed them yet. They should give their names to him." "Sorry."

"Sounds like they know your names already," said the man on the cycle, taking off his helmet. These guys were twins.

Although Arlene kept her promise about not discussing theological matters, she leapt into any other waters that gurgled up around us. "That's a bad machine," she said.

Nate proved to be his brother's brother: "You like this?" he asked with a big grin.

"They have good taste in guns," said Jerry, spurring them on. Albert groaned.

Nate was on a roll: "BMW Paris-Dakar, 1000 cc's …" He and Arlene went on about the bike for a few minutes.

Part of me wanted to strangle the girl; but another part appreciated what she was doing. Putting the other guys at their ease is a critical strategy. There were a lot more men in the street than women, but our captors—hosts?—remained respectful and polite in Arlene's presence. A very civilized society. "… and the glove compartment can hold five grenades!" announced Nate, topping off his presentation.

"That does it," said Albert. "If these nice people are spies, why don't you just give them mimeo-graphed reports?"

In the short time we'd been prisoners, I'd learned that there was no genuine military discipline here. I had mixed feelings about this. The good thing was that I couldn't

believe these casual people had been co-opted by the invaders. They still talked and acted like free men. Very loquacious free men! As far as getting their president to cooperate with us, it could go either way. In the land of the civilians, the Marine is king … or a fall guy. I was impatient to find out which.

"Oh, I almost forgot," said Nate. "I have a message for you. The President hasn't returned yet." "You should have told us that right off," said Albert peevishly. "We'll take them to Holding." We entered the Tabernacle. It was nice and cool, with a fresh wood smell that was clean and bracing. The floors were highly polished. You wouldn't notice anything different from the world I'd left on a court-martial charge that now seemed to belong to a different universe.

Arlene wasn't the only one with a lot of reading under her belt. I didn't know a whole lot about the Mormons, although I knew a bit more than I told her—but I'd read the Bible all the way through, enough to recognize things the Mormons took for inspiration from what they accepted as the earlier Revealed Word.

In addition, the nuns taught a little about comparative religion, probably so we'd be better missionaries. I remembered that God was supposed to have given Moses directions for the construction of the Tabernacle. The structure was to be a house constructed of a series of boards of a special wood, overlaid with gold, set on end into sockets of silver. In other words, it wasn't Saint Pete's, but it was no Alabama revival tent either. The Mormons adapted the idea for a permanent standing structure.

Right outside the Tabernacle were some more conventional office buildings. We entered one, and were led into an office by Albert. "I'll bring you something to eat and drink," he said. I was hungry and thirsty enough to settle for bread and water. A minute later Albert returned with bread and water, then left us alone.

"Damn," I said; "I was hoping for a more splendorous galley."

I walked over to a small table, and picked up the sole object on it: the Book of Mormon: Another Testament of Jesus Christ. I felt puckish and decided to tease Arlene a bit. I thought she'd pushed the envelope too much, encouraging the more talkative of our captors.

"Bet you can't remember all the books in here, Arlene."

She gave me that look of hers. "Will you bet me the next decent weapon we find?"

"Deal," I said.

“Okay,” she replied, and rattled them off: “First and Second Books of Nephi, Jacob, Enos, Jarom, Omni, the Words of Mormon, Book of Mosiah, Alma, Helaman, Third and Fourth Nephi, Book of Mormon, Ether, Moroni. You’re not getting out of this, Fly. I get first pick on the next piece!”

“Damn!” I said, thoroughly impressed.

“Watch what you say near a holy place.” “Don’t worry about it,” came a third voice. Albert had rejoined us without knocking.

“Don’t you knock?” asked Arlene.

“As soon as you’re no longer prisoners,” he said, closing the door behind him. “I just wanted you to know that I don’t think you’re spies for the demons.” “We call them aliens,” I said. The medieval terminology didn’t bother me when Arlene and I were using it to distinguish the different kinds of monsters. It seemed very different when talking to a deeply religious perseon. These things from space could be killed. They were created by scientific means. In no way should they be confused with immortal spirits against which all the firepower in the galaxy would mean nothing.

“I understand,” said Albert. “Would you mind telling me who you are and how you came to be here?”

“Won’t the President ask us that?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“Then why should we tell you?” asked Arlene. “Because I don’t have to be as cautious, and I’m a fellow soldier.”

“So you should tell us about yourself,” I said. “In time. You don’t have to tell me anything either, but you should consider it.”

“Well,” I said, thinking on my feet, “if we talk to one Mormon, we should probably talk to the leader.” Albert laughed. “We’re not all Mormons here,” he said. “Just most of us.”

“Oh?” I said, unconvinced.

“Uh, I am,” he cautioned. “Think about it. We’re fighting the common enemy of mankind. We don’t care if you’re Mormons. We care that you can be trusted.”

“Makes sense,” admitted Arlene in a tone of voice so natural that I realized she’d been subtly mocking them before.

“I’m of the Church,” continued Albert, “but Jerry and Nate are Jehovah’s Witnesses.”

“I thought they didn’t fight,” said Arlene, surprised.

“They are not pacifists, but neither are they of the Latter-Day Dispensations,” he said as warning bells went off in my head. I prayed I could count on Arlene’s promise to keep her trap shut … but she pressed her lips pretty tight.

“Latter-day what?”

Albert was more succinct than his friends: “They believe all the world’s governments are works of the devil. They won’t fight their fellow man at the command of a state. But they can fight unhuman monsters until Judgment Day.”

“I get it,” I said. “Draft protesters in World War Two—“ “But volunteers for this,” Albert finished. “What do you mean by, uh, ‘dispensation’?” He laughed. Apparently we’d fallen into the hands of someone lacking in missionary zeal, for which I was grateful. “The United States Constitution was ordained by God. That’s why we didn’t like seeing it subverted. We never know if a governmental person is good or bad until we see where his loyalty lies. But you two made a wonderful impression on the Witnesses; I think you’ll do fine with the President. If you change your mind about chatting with me, you will find me easily enough.” He left us with the promise we would see the President soon.

Three hours later we were led to the office of the President of the Twelve. A clean-shaven, elderly man with pure white hair, a dark tan, and a tailored suit got up from behind a walnut desk and rested his hands on his blotter. He kept his distance. He had a judge’s face, carved in stone. If we were assassins, he was giving us a clear shot at him. But Albert and Jerry continued to baby-sit, fingers on triggers. Mexican standoff. He sized us up. We did the same to him. He reminded me of a senior colonel in the Corps, a man used to giving orders.

Finally, he coughed. “I’m the President here,” he said.

“You make it sound like President of the United States,” I said.

He didn’t seem to mind. “Might as well be,” he said, “under the circumstances. Who are you?” We gave him name, rank, and serial number. Being a gentleman, I let Arlene go

first. Then he asked the sixty-four-trillion-dollar question: “How is it you come to be here?”

Arlene laughed and let him have it: “Fly, here—that’s his nickname—Fly and I single-handedly kicked the spit out of the entire Deimos division of the alien demons. They moved the Martian moon into orbit around Earth, but we cleaned their clocks.” The leader of the Mormons said, “This is a time for mighty warriors. We have many prophecies to this effect. In the Book of Alma there is a verse that I find indispensable for morale:

“Behold, I am in my anger, and also my people; ye have sought to muder us, and we have only sought to defend ourselves.”

He smiled, pausing before continuing.

“But behold, if ye seek to destroy us more we will seek to destroy you; yea, and we will seek our land, the land of our first inheritance.” “Those words were spoken by Moroni. We must gird our loins for battle against the ultimate enemy. At such times as this even women must be used in a manner unnatural to them. Do you know how much Delta-V is required to move a moon, even one as small as Deimos? Why should I believe you?” I blinked, nonplussed by the change in subject. Glancing quickly at Arlene, I saw she was controlling her reaction to the “unnatural” crack, her face impassive. Good girl!

“We, ah, fight the same enemy,” I said. “This is what you purport. You also claim to have hopped out of orbit and landed on your feet. Pray that we may prove both to our satisfaction. Until such time, we must be careful. If what you say is true, you will be able to demonstrate this to us on a mission. Only then, if you earn our trust, will you”—he pointedly stared at me, ignoring Arlene—“be allowed access to our special wisdom. The audience is over, and good luck to you.”

I worried that Arlene might say something stupid when I saw her mouth open and the danger sign of her eyebrows rising faster than any rocket. Hell, I was worried about myself. But we were ushered out of there without any disasters.

“As far as I’m concerned,” said Albert, leading us back to our room, accompanied by Jerry, “you just flunked spy school.”

“Huh?”

“I don’t imagine a spy would concoct so ridiculous a story and annoy the President so thoroughly.” I said nothing; privately, I thought that was exactly what a spy might do. It worked, didn’t it? We felt tension leaking from the corridor, like air escaping from the

dome on Deimos. At least the President was taking some kind of chance on us. He didn't realize how big a chance he'd taken talking that way to Arlene.

"We belong to the brotherhood of man," Albert said. "If you think you have problems now, just wait until people begin believing your story. Then we'll start treating you like angels!"

9

I guess they believed our story, somewhat at least. Fly and I were left alone at last when that rugged stalwart, Albert Whatever, scurried off on some errand.

Fly gestured me close. “We really should report in,” he whispered in my ear.

“Report in? To whom?” A good question. If the country were as devastated as we’d been led to believe, there wasn’t much of a military command structure left to report to anybody.

If… I saw at once where Fly was coming from. “How much do we really know about these guys?” asked Fly, confirming my cognition. “Whose side are they on?”

“You’d have a hard time persuading me they’re demon-lovers,” I said.

“All right … maybe. They’re patriots. But are they right?”

Wasn’t much I could say to that. Fly had a point… as patriotic and pro-human as these Mormons might be, they still might be wrong about the extent of the collapse. “You’re saying they could be deluded by their apocalyptic religion.”

He raised his brows. “Mormons aren’t apocalyptic, Arlene. I think you’re confusing them with certain branches of Christianity. I’m only saying that they’re pretty cut off from information … the whole government might look like it’s collapsed from this view-point; but maybe if we contacted somebody somewhere else, in the Pentagon or at least an actual Marine Corps base, maybe we’d get a different picture.”

“All right. Who, then?”

“Chain of command, Arlene. Who do you think we should contact?”

I’m always forgetting about the omnipresent chain. Usually, all I see are enlisted guys like me, maybe one C.O.—Weems, in our case. I’m not used to thinking of the Great Chain of Being rising above my head all the way up to the C-in-C, the President of the United States. Guess that’s why Fly makes the big bucks (heh) as a noncom, while I’m just a grunt.

“Um, Major Boyd, I guess. Or the great-grandboss, Colonel Karapetian.”

“Hm … I’m betting this is a bit above m’lord Boyd’s head. I think we should take this up with God Himself: the colonel.”

“I agree completely. Got the phone number?” “Yeah, well, that’s the next problem. Surely in a facility this size, there has to be a radio room somewhere, wouldn’t you think?”

We did a lot of thinking over the next hour; we also did a lot of quiet, careful questioning, staying away from those obviously “under arms,” questioning the less suspicious civilians instead. But what we mostly did was a lot of walking. My dogs were barking like Dobermans long before we found anything radio-roomlike.

The “compound” actually comprised a whole series of buildings, different clumps far away, and included a large portion of downtown Salt Lake City. There were other buildings and residences all around, of course; SLC is big. Well not compared to my old hometown of L.A., of course, but you get the idea. “The compound” might include two buildings and not include the building in between them; it wasn’t defined geographically.

However, we quickly discovered we were restricted to a small, two-block radius surrounding the Tabernacle. An electrified fence cut that central core off from the rest of the facility (and the rest of the city); guards patrolled the fence like a military base; there were even suspicious pillboxes with tiny bits of what might have been the barrels of crew-served weapons poking out, and piles of camouflaged tarps that might conceal tanks or Bradleys. And the guards were as tight about controlling what left the core as they were about what entered.

I saw a lump that looked suspiciously like an M-2/A-2 tank, state of the art; I turned to point it out to Fly, but he was busy staring at the tall office building at our backs. “What’s that up top of that sky-scraper?” he asked.

“Skyscraper? You’ve lived in too many small towns, Fly-boy.”

“Yeah, yeah. What’s up top there? That metal thing?”

“Um … a TV aerial.”

“Are you sure? Look again.”

I stared, squinting to clear up my mild astigmatism. “Huh, I see what you mean. It could be, but I’m not sure. You think it’s a radio antenna, right?” “I don’t know what they’re

supposed to look like when they're stationary, only what they look like on the box we carry with us."

"Well, you have an urgent appointment, Fly? Let's check it out."

"Sure hope they have a working elevator," he said, surprising me; I thought after our experiences on Deimos, he'd never want to look at another lift again. There was an armed guard at the front entrance of the building, which was a mere fifteen stories tall… hardly a "skyscraper." The rear entrance was barricaded. The guard unshipped the Sig-Cow rifle he carried. "Ayren't you the two unbelievers who claim they stopped the aliens cold on Deimos?" "That's we," I said, "Unbelievers 'R' Us." Fly hushed me. He always claims I make things worse in any confrontational situation, but I just don't see it.

"The President sent us on an inspection tour," said Fly with the sort of easy, confident lying I admired so much but could never pull off. "Supposed to 'familiarize' ourselves with your SOPs." He rolled his eyes; you could hear the quotation marks around familiarize. "As if we haven't had enough military procedures for a lifetime!"

The guard shook his head, instantly sympathetic. "Ain't it the truth? Few weeks ago, you know what I was? I was a cook at the Elephant Grill, you know, up at Third? So what do they make me when the war breaks out? A sentry!"

"You know this building well?"

"Well, I should! My fiancee worked here. Before the war."

"Look, can you come along with us, show us the place? I come from a small town, and we don't have buildings this size. You're not stuck as the only guard, are you?" There were no other guards in sight; I'm sure Fly noticed that as well as I.

"'Fraid so, Corporal."

"Fly. Fly Taggart."

"I'm afraid so, Fly. I can't leave. Look, you can't get lost. It's just a big, tall square. See the Tabernacle there? Anytime you get lost, just walk to the windows and walk around until you see the Tabernacle. You can't miss it."

"You sure it'll be okay?"

"You can't miss it. No problemo."

“Look, if I get in trouble, is there a phone I can call down here on?”

“Sure, use the black phone near the elevator, the one with no buttons. Just pick it up; it’ll ring here.” “Thanks. This way? The elevators over here?” The helpful sentry showed us how to get to the elevators. They were actually behind some partitions; we might not have found them … for several minutes.

We climbed aboard, and Fly said in a normal speaking voice, “Don’t trust these elevators. May as well start at the top and walk down, floor by floor, familiarizing ourselves with the procedures. Then we can report back to the President and tell him where we’d do the most good.”

To me, he used hand signals: Start top; find radio; broadcast report.

The antenna was atop the roof, of course; but that didn’t mean that’s where the radio room would be. We wandered around every floor, trying to look official. Early on, I found a clipboard hanging on a peg in the rooftop janitor’s shed, where they kept all the window-washing stuff. Fly took the clipboard and made a point of officiously writing down reports on everybody in every office, with me trailing along behind looking like his assistant.

It worked; people tensed up, stopped talking, worked diligently, and not a one confronted us to ask us who the hell we were. It helped that Fly had been inventory control officer for a few months. He stirred them up and made them sweat.

Finally, twelve floors down from the top, we found the damned radio room. Two operators, both civilians. One had a pistol; we were unarmed, of course. Fly strode in like Gunnery Sergeant Goforth on the inspection warpath. “On your feet,” he barked; the startled operators stared for a second, then leapt to their feet and stood at a bad imitation of attention. “Classified message traffic from the President,” he snarled. “Take a hike.”

“Sir, we’re not supposed to—”

“Sir? Do you see these?” He angrily pointed at his stripes. “Do I look like a God-damned pansy-waist gut-sucking ass-kissing four-eyed college-boy officer to you?”

“No sir! No—ah—”

Fly leaned close, playing drill instructor. “Try COR-POR-AL, boy. Next time you open that hole of yours, first word out better be Corporal Taggart.” “C-C-Corporal Taggart, sir! I mean, Corporal Taggart, we’re not supposed to leave.”

“Did you hear what type of message traffic I said this was?”

“Classified? Sir—Corporal!—we’re fully cleared for all levels of classification.”

“Do I know that, boy? You got some paper you can show me?”

“No, not on me.”

“Then take a hike, dickhead. Go back and get something from your C.O. We’ll wait right here.” The man dithered, looking back and forth at the door, the equipment, and his partner, a small, frail-looking man who pointedly looked away, saying No, way, bud, this is your call. “All right. You won’t touch anything while I’m gone, will you?”

“Scout’s honor,” sneered Fly. Was he ever a Boy Scout? I couldn’t remember.

The man slid sideways past Fly and almost backed into me. I glared daggers at him and he split. After a couple of seconds Fly turned to the mousy companion. “What’re you still doing here? Get after your partner!”

Meekly, the man turned and darted out of the room.

“Fly, what’s going to happen when they get across the street and find out there’s no message traffic from the President?”

“Well, we’d better hurry, A.S., so we’re done before they get back!”

Fortunately, they’d left the equipment on, because I had no idea how to turn it on. It was some new, ultramodern civilian stuff I’d never seen before. I found a keypad next to a small LED display. At the moment, it showed the frequency for Guard channel, plus another freak above that.

I tapped at the keypad; they hadn’t locked it out, thank God. I typed the freak for North Marine Corps Air Base, office of the SubCincMarsCom, Colonel George Karapetian. It was no great trick remembering it; I was the radioman for Major Boyd when we were stationed on Deimos on TDS to the Navy. I wandered all over the band from one side to the other, looking for the carrier. Finally, I found it; it was weak and intermittent, as if the repeaters were blown and I was picking up the source itself. But I boosted the gain, and we were able to pick out the words from behind the snow.

I engaged the standard CD encrypter, digitally adding the signal to a CD of random noise from background radiation; they had an identical disk at North—if we were lucky, they’d figure out that the signal was scrambled and pull their encryption on-line.

“Corporal Fly Taggart, commanding officer of Fox Company, Fourth Battalion, 223rd Light Drop Division, to SubCincMarsCom, come in, Colonel Karapetian.”

Fly broadcast the message over and over, and I started to get nervous … both about the time and about the lack of response. Finally, a voice sputtered into life on the line. I recognized it; it was the colonel himself, not some enlisted puke.

“Fox, connect me to Lieutenant Weems. Fourth Battalion, over.”

“Fourth Battalion, Weems is dead; I am in command of Fox.”

“Who is this?”

“Corporal Taggart, sir.”

“Corporal, give me a full report. Over.” Fly gave the colonel the verbal cook’s tour of everything that had happened to us in the past few weeks. When he finished, Karapetian was quiet for so long, I thought we’d lost the carrier.

“I understand,” he said. “Now where the hell are you? Can you get back here, like yesterday?” “We’re at a resistance center in Salt Lake City,” Fly said. Suddenly, I got an uneasy feeling in my stomach; should we be spilling this much intel, even to the sub-Commander in Chief of the Mars Command? “Use rail transport,” ordered Karapetian. “Get your butts to Pendleton as fast as you can. We’ve got to talk face-to-face about this. Got that, Corporal?” “Aye, sir.”

“Good. Then I’ll expect you tomorrow at—“ With a loud thunk, the entire system died. All the dials, all the diodes, all the cool flashing lights. I looked over my shoulder; Albert towered over us, his face set in a mask of concrete. On one side stood our friendly guard from the entrance; on the other was the radio tech Fly had bullied, holding a remote-control power switch in his hands.

I gasped; framed in the light, Albert looked like he had a halo.

“I’m afraid you’re going to have to come with me,” Albert said.

“Where?” I asked.

“To the President. Only he can decide cases of high treason against the Army of God and Man United.”

10

With a heavy heart, I brought our two miscreant warriors to the President of the Twelve. I tried to keep angry thoughts from my mind; judgment and vengeance are the Lord's prerogatives, not ours. Besides, I genuinely liked Fly Taggart, and I even believed his wild story about fighting the alien demons on Phobos and Deimos. And Miss Sanders, now …

No, that's wrong. I had no right; I didn't even know her.

I brought them into the chamber of justice to find the President and his mast already seated. He wore a suit; I sighed a hearty prayer of thanksgiving to the Lord that this was to be mast, not a court-martial; the President would have worn his robe for the latter. "Sit," I commanded, putting a heavy hand on each prisoner's shoulder and pushing him into the waiting chair.

"Who speaks for the outsiders?" asked Bishop Wilston. He was a stickler for legalities. "They can speak for themselves," said the President, "this isn't a formal trial. I just want to find out what the devil happened—and to find out whether the devil himself was responsible."

"Or just the imp of stupidity," I said. The President glared at me; but I learned my manners under his predecessor, who would listen to even the youngest child with a mind to speak. This new fellow was from out of state and a personal mentor of our old President, may he rest in peace.

"You're rude," said the President, "but you may be right. Corporal Taggart, as the responsible NCO, what on Earth possessed you to start broadcasting all over the globe from our radio room?"

"Well, um …" Fly looked distinctly pink. "It seemed like a good idea at the time."

"Why are you so flipping surprised?" demanded the woman. "Why shouldn't we report to our C.O.? We just got back from a mission. What the hell did you expect?"

For a moment I thought the President was going to burst a blood vessel. We all turned in annoyance to Fly; couldn't he control his woman? His team member?

He was not a stupid man; he spoke up quickly:

“Arlene is tired, upset—you know how women get.” Now it was Arlene’s turn to turn angry-red, opening and closing her mouth like she wanted to say something devastating but couldn’t even find the words. Wisely, she pressed her lips together and said nothing. A soft answer turneth away wrath, says the proverb; or again, Even a fool, when he holdeth his peace, is counted wise. The President was mollified and chose to take the question seriously.

“Miss Sanders—”

“Private Sanders, if you will,” she said, voice betraying the seething emotion within. Her red hair flamed like a burning house, setting off her green eyes. “Private Sanders, the ‘why’ is because the entire military structure of the erstwhile United States, from top to bottom, has been co-opted by the demons. Our former government has capitulated . . , they surrendered, to put it bluntly, two weeks ago.” “Oh, really! Maybe everybody but the Marines.

Semper fidel—”

“Even the Marines,” said the President softly. The sudden change from loud and angry to quiet and cold lent him an air of authority, as was befitting. I must admit, the man had the mark of divine awe; the Lord definitely moved through the President, when he let Him.

“Do you two know what you’ve done?” asked the bishop. “Even the broadcast itself might have been traced. But to actually tell the forces of darkness where we are … ! That passes understanding.” “Look, maybe I shouldn’t have done that. But they must already have known this was a pocket of resistance.”

Don’t dig yourself a deeper grave, Fly, I thought urgently. Outwardly, I kept my face impassive; no need to draw the judges’ attention to the attempt at blame-shifting.

“But Corporal,” said the President, voice at its quietest and most dangerous, “they did not know that you were here. If you still maintain that you and your—your comrade aborted the division invading through Deimos, don’t you think you might have incurred a special wrath, a wrath now transferred to us? Perhaps they consider you Demonic Enemy Number One. Did that cross your mind?”

Fly remained silent. Good man. So did Arlene. I stared at the woman; she was not at all bad-looking, not what I would expect of a female Marine. I had never served with one in my three years of active duty service; she looked tough, but not like an American Gladiator.

In fact, the swell of her breasts and hips was quite womanly; she would be a sturdy woman, well able to bear many children and face the rigors of life under siege. I could almost see her standing in a doorway, babe in arms … or lying bare on the bed, awaiting me—

Ow! My conscience hammered on my head. What are you DOING, you godless sinner! Here I was, in the presence of the representative of Jesus Christ Himself, and I was mentally undressing this woman! Get thee behind me, Satan: thou art an offense to me: for thou savorest not the things that be of God, but those that be of men.

I concentrated on verses from the Bible and the Book of Mormon, mentally reciting them so quickly I lost all track of the trial and Miss Sanders. When I blinked back, Fly and Arlene looked chastened, humble. They clearly repented of their foolish act and had found their way back to friendship with God. Pride and Arrogance were banished—well, for the moment.

The President sighed heavily. "Go and be stupid no more. And prepare for an attack, for surely one arrives within an hour or two." He nodded to the bishop, who, as General of the Armies of the Lord, had primary responsibility for readying our defenses. I already knew my station: Jerry and I manned the dike west of the city, along with two thousand other stalwarts.

I had an idea. "Mr. President," I called. He turned back, pausing at the door. "Sir, I'd like to suggest that Taggart and Sanders be assigned to the defense along-side me."

He stared at me, and I squirmed. "Any particular reason? They've already had their chance and botched it."

"That, sir, is the reason. Let them atone for their mistake. They may have cost the lives of righteous men; let them at least stand beside those men and put their own lives on the line. Let them be at peace." I glanced at Fly and Miss Sanders, and was tremendously relieved to see a grateful look on their faces. I was right about them: stupid, maybe; but they had honor, and they probably felt like children whose rough play accidentally killed the pet dog. I sure would.

The President was a hard man; but he was a just man—else the Lord would not have allowed him to serve as President of the Twelve; the Father has His ways of making His pleasure known. He shook his head, but said, "I think you're too forgiving a man, Albert; but you know them better than I ever could. Take them, if your C.O. approves."

The bishop was smiling, though not in a friendly way. "He'll approve," he prophesied.

Less than half an hour later we were at the line. I took care to see that both Fly and Miss Sanders were armed, so they would know we still extended our trust. It was part of the healing process. And the President's prophecy came true, albeit a little late: in fact, it took the forces of darkness two hours to mass and attack, not one.

Squinting into the distance, I saw first a column of dust at the ragged edge of vision. We watched for several minutes before even hearing the sound; you can see a long, long way in the Utah desert, where ten miles seems like one. The dust came from a column of Bradley Fighting Vehicles, the same type in which I had trained as a gunner before going to sniper school. Thank the Lord they hadn't yet had time to scrounge any M-2 tanks!

As they roared up, we surprised them: the antitank batteries opened up at two klicks. In the still air, the artillery captains had the eyes of angels; they dropped the first load of ordnance directly on the advancing line. The laser spotter-scopes helped.

Once the troops knew they were not up against cowed, frightened refugees, they separated and advanced while evading. I took a risk, standing atop the dike and focusing through binoculars mounted on a pole. It was the BATF in the vanguard, as usual, backed up by FBI shock troops. Reporting the battle order over my encrypted radio, I saw the gold flag of the IRS and realized we would doubtless have to face flamethrowers and chemical-biological warfare shells. The bastards. Regular Army filled in the gaps and supplied most of the grunts—cannon fodder, as we called them.

They brought a contingent of brownies and baphomets, but no molochs, praise God. Probably didn't have any nearby. But I'd bet my last bullet there'd be molochs and shelobs aplenty before the week was out. There were a few of the unclean undead, but most of the soldiers, horribly enough, appeared to be living allies of the demons. I hoped to spare Fly that knowledge, that our own species would willingly cooperate in the subjugation of men to demons from another star; but maybe it was better he find out now. I guess he realized how wrong he was … but it was a horrible way to find out.

Contact was established a quarter hour later, on the north side of Salt Lake City. Within a few minutes battle was joined in my quadrant as well. Fly and Arlene acquitted themselves admirably; they were no cowards! I especially enjoyed watching the girl in combat, too busy and scared even to worry whether my interest was righteous or sinful. She loped forward to the out perimeter and spotted for the mortars; my heart was in my throat—if they spotted her, that beautiful body would be blown to tiny pieces in seconds.

Bombs and shells exploded left and right, but our positions were secure; except for the occasional lucky shot, the evil ones hit only stragglers. But I was very glad for my earplugs; Fly had refused a pair, but Arlene took them.

We threw back the initial blitzkrieg; the demons simply weren't prepared for that savage a level of resistance. They'd probably never encountered it before. Like the heroic Jews of the Warsaw Ghetto, who stood up to the Nazi butchers, without despair, we forced the bastards back and back, until at last they withdrew and formed a circle around our force, three klicks back—out of range, they thought. After two more hours passed without movement, Arlene and Fly took a chance and returned to me. They looked shaken. I wanted to put my arm around Corporal Taggart, cheer him up; how could he have known? But the gesture would not have been appreciated. He stepped across the dead bodies of righteous men to come to me; he knew what he had done, and the last soul to forgive him would be himself. He would probably carry guilt to his grave, unless he found a minister to unburden himself. I had the vague thought that he was a Catholic. I would never condone such a perversion of the teachings of Christ—in normal times; but in this world, even to call oneself a Christian is a courageous step. I hoped he would find a priest and confess; otherwise, he might never give himself absolution. "We seemed to have scored a temporary stale-mate," he said, sounding defeated.

"We kicked ass!" argued Arlene.

"You're both right," I said, ever the diplomat. "But how long can we hold out?" asked Fly. "A few days? A week? Two weeks? Eventually they'll get reinforcements and overrun us." He didn't add and all because of me, but I could tell he thought it. "Eventually," I agreed. "In about five or six years."

"Years? What the hell do you mean?"

I winked. "We've been preparing for this sort of war for a long time, my friend … we just never realized we'd be fighting literal demons!"

"Jesus … who were you expecting to fight?" The blasphemy angered me, but I let it slide. He was an unbeliever and might not even realize what he'd said. "Exactly who we are fighting; the forces of Mammon. We'd hoped to avert the crisis by engaging in the world, steering it toward the righteousness of the Constitution ordained by God Himself in 1787. We sent our members out into the world, joined the Army, the FBI, the Washington power structure. We increased our numbers within the IRS and even within NASA. But in the end, all that effort bought us only advance warning and some spies and saboteurs within the enemy ranks."

Fly shook his head, dazed. He said nothing. "Now we are the last stronghold in the continental United States. There is but one major enclave left on the planet for humans and the godly; there centers the Resistance."

“Where?”

I chuckled. “Even if I knew, Fly, I wouldn’t tell you. Your interest rate on keeping secrets isn’t very high right now.”

He smiled sardonically. “I guess I wouldn’t tell you either, if you’d just done what we did. What I did.” “We,” corrected Arlene. “You were right the first time. I stood right beside you and helped you report to Karapetian.”

He shrugged, neither confirming nor denying.

“Are there plans to get to the Resistance?” “If there are, we haven’t executed them yet. We can send brief messages—too quick to triangulate or decrypt. But we can’t send people.”

“Why not?”

“There is some sort of energy barrier that prevents us from leaving the continent … and at times, even from leaving an urban center. Los Angeles has one; you cannot fly from L.A. to anywhere else unless the demons drop the wall—which they do only for their own, of course.”

“But if you go around the barrier?”

“We’ve tried; we can’t find an edge. It seems to be everywhere. What we need to do is find the source or the control center and shut it off. At least long enough to get our people out, join up with the Resistance. Otherwise, eventually, we will fall; we have years worth of food and medicine, but not decades worth. And after a while they will mass enough troops against us to overrun us in any case.

“Worst-case scenario, you two, we lose this city after a four-month siege. That’s if they throw everything in the world at us.”

“Are you kidding?” demanded an incredulous Arlene. “What about missiles? Nuclear bombs dropped from airplanes?”

“Our agents were heavily involved in the Strategic Defense Initiative … remember?” I winked. “And we have anti-air defenses too. We’re not worried about nukes; we’re more worried about tanks and undead soldiers. None of our defenses were erected with molochs in mind.”

“Molochs?”

“What you called steam-demons, I believe.” Suddenly, the radio phone buzzed. The radioman answered, listened for a moment, saying a string of “yessirs.” He turned to me. “Albert, the President wants to see your charges.”

“Now?”

“Tonight. The captain says he has a mission for them … something to prove themselves after their incompetence … no offense, guys; I’m just quoting.” “None taken,” said Arlene, highly offended. My eyes began to dwell longingly on her curves and swells again, and I brutally forced my gaze to the dead and wounded littering the battlefield … even their dead. The corpsmen were already busy, collecting the casualties for transportation to hospital.

“Got a time?” I asked.

“Eighteen hundred,” said the radioman. I didn’t know his name, even though he knew mine; it made me uncomfortable.

I nodded. “Okay, you heard the man. Fly, Arlene, start polishing your brass. We’ve got three hours before your mission briefing. And guys?” They waited expectantly.

“Try not to hose it up. This time.”

Arlene Sanders flipped me the finger; but Fly just looked down at his boots, brushing the mud off with his hands.

11

Arlene, Albert, and I sat in our little room like old friends. “Albert, you were right,” I said. “We should have asked you before charging off to report to Karapetian.”

“The fact that you had to sneak around and concoct an absurd fairy tale should have told you something,” he said, smiling faintly. I caught Arlene looking at him with an interest I hadn’t seen in her eyes since she first began getting close to old Dodd. Could she … ? Nah; that was a silly thought. Not with how she felt about religion in general—and Mormons in particular. Not after her brother.

She spoke, her voice tight and controlled. “Albert, can you tell us what on Earth happened? I mean here on Earth.”

“Gladly,” said Albert.

Evidently, even with only half an invasion force, the urban areas of Earth had fallen quickly. Albert suspected that high-ranking U.S. government officials and their counterparts in other governments, the federal and state agencies and even the services themselves—the U.S. Marine Corps!—actually collaborated with the aliens.

I guess there wasn’t much argument I could make … not after seeing living human beings on the march against us in the siege. If I cared to climb up to the roof, I could see them still. I didn’t care to. The monsters promised a peaceful occupation and promised each collaborator that his own government would be given the top command slot. A tried and true approach, with plenty of terrestrial examples: it worked for Hitler and Stalin; now it worked for a bunch of plug-uglies from beyond the planets. Naturally, the aliens screwed the traitors, killing hundreds of millions … utterly destroying Washington, D.C., and demolishing much of New York, Paris, Moscow, and Beijing. The Mormons knew the invaders were really serious when all the stock exchanges were wiped out in two hours.

“They control all the big cities now,” Albert reported.

“So at least some things will feel the same,” said Arlene. Our newfound friend laughed uproariously. He was taking to Arlene’s morbid brand of humor. “What’s the Resistance like?” she asked, hanging on his every word. I started to resent her interest. Maybe I was only her “big brother,” but shouldn’t that count for something?

Albert turned up his hands. “How should I know? We know only that they exist, and they have a lot of science types, teenies. They’re working on stuff all the time … but so far, they haven’t been able to shut off the energy wall from outside—and the only way to get to it from the inside is to mount an assault … or infiltrate.”

“Maybe that’s what the President wants us to do,” I speculated; I don’t think Albert had any more idea than I, though.

Jerry joined us again; now he too was in a dark suit, though still heavily armed with a Browning Automatic Rifle. It reminded me of a “Family” war between Mafia soldiers I began to feel distinctly underdressed. “What about the countryside?” I asked.

Albert nodded and answered: “That’s the local resistance, such as it is. At least we are not alone. For a little longer, at least.”

Jerry volunteered a comment: “They seem more interested in taking slaves from the rural areas than conquering the territory.”

Albert concurred: “It gives us a fighting chance, they being so slow expanding their pale.” “What is this ‘special wisdom’ the President offered to share before the attack?” I asked. “Can you give us a hint?”

Albert and Jerry exchanged the look of comrades in arms. “Don’t worry about it,” said Albert. “He’s less worried about what you know than what you see.” Albert insisted that Arlene and I rest and bathe. The only choice offered was a cold shower, but that was fine with us. We found clean clothes. Then we got the “fifty-cent-tour” from Albert, the tour that wouldn’t get him in trouble.

Albert took us down to the hidden catacombs they’d constructed beneath the Tabernacle complex. The trip began with an elevator ride. The metal was shiny and new. Everything was air-conditioned. The doors slid open to reveal something out of the latest James Bond movie. But somehow I was not surprised at the vast complex they had constructed. We walked under a gigantic V arch to bear witness to dozens of miles of secret shelters. We were not taken behind the locked doors to see the contents, but Albert told us they had millions of rounds of ammunition, stores, heavy military equipment, a whole factory, and more. It was survivalist heaven.

“I wonder what kind of heavy equipment?” Arlene whispered in my ear.

“Tanks and Humvees,” I whispered back. “The rest when he trusts us.”

“I’m sure he’ll trust us plenty after we’ve died for the cause,” she concluded.

“Can’t hardly blame him.” I could kick myself for such self-pity, but I couldn’t get my stupidity out of my mind.

We took a turn in the passageway and reached another elevator marked for five more levels down. “Jesus!” said Arlene, followed by: “Sorry, Albert.” He only shook his head. Even Albert was probably cutting her some slack for being female. Arlene could always sense a patronizing attitude, but she had too much class to throw it back at someone working so hard to play fair with her.

“Why would you have all this?” she asked. He didn’t hesitate in answering, “To equalize our relations with the IRS.”

“Man, all I had was Melrose Larry Green, CPA,” marveled Arlene.

“I’ll let both of you in on something,” he said, “because it hardly matters today. All you saw today were ground troops; but did you know the IRS had its own ‘Delta Force,’ the Special Revenue Collection Division?”

We shook our heads, but once again I wasn’t really surprised. “In case of another Whiskey Rebellion?” I guessed.

“An interesting way of putting it,” he said, and continued: “They had an infantry division, two armored cav regiments, a hidden fast-attack submarine, a heavy bomber wing, and from what I hear, a carrier battle group.”

Somebody whistled. It was Yours Truly. If the Mormons knew about that, could they have wound up with some of it? This was an obvious thought, and would make full use of an installation this size; but I wasn’t going to ask. Arlene and I were lucky to be learning this much.

“How’d they finance it?” I asked.

“The IRS can finance anything?” suggested Arlene, as if a student in school.

“Well, even they had to cover their tracks,” said Albert. “Jerry thinks they hid the military buildup inside the fictitious budget deficit. Unfortunately, the Special Revenue Collection Division was seized by the demons.”

“Aliens,” Arlene corrected, almost unconsciously.

“Whatever.”

This seemed a good moment to clear up the nomenclature: “Actually, Albert, we named the different kinds of aliens to keep them separate. We call the dumb pink ones the demons.”

“How did the aliens get their claws on all that IRS equipment?” Arlene asked.

“Hm. Because Internal Revenue was the very first group to sell out Earth,” he answered. This was definitely not a day of surprises.

“Do we get to ride on the other elevator?” I asked. “Later,” he said. “And I’m sorry I can’t show you behind the doors.”

“No, you’ve been great, Albert,” said Arlene. I could tell she was impressed for real, no joke. This was rare. “Why don’t you tell us about your checkered military past?”

“That’s next on the agenda,” he said, “and the President will want to brief you on the mission, if he’s picked it yet.”

We took the elevator back up to face the boss. I promised myself that no matter how much I wanted to do it, I wouldn’t say, “Howdy, pardner.” Three more bodyguards surrounded the President.

These guys didn’t seem friendly like Albert or Jerry. He led us to the auxiliary command center (I supposed the real command center was at the bottom level of the complex), where we learned that the nearest nerve center of the alien invasion was Los Angeles. The monsters had set up their ultra-advanced computer services and war technology center near the HOLLYWOOD sign. I didn’t want to ask who sold out humanity there. I was afraid to find out. The President didn’t waste time coming to the point: “Two highly trained Marines who fought the enemy to a standstill in space, then floated down out of orbit, would be better qualified to lead a certain mission we have in mind than our own people. This is assuming that we haven’t been subject to a certain degree of exaggeration. A man and a woman alone could only be expected to do so much against hundreds of the enemy.”

Arlene was behaving herself, but it dawned on me that I hadn’t made any promises to keep my mouth shut. This wasn’t about religion. This was about doubting our word after we’d swum through a world of hurt to get this far.

I reminded myself that we needed this man; I reminded myself we’d already hosed the job … but stupidity had nothing to do with dishonor! “If the two of you could get to Los Angeles,” the leader continued, “and make it into the computer system, download full

specs on their most basic technology, and get it back to the United States War Technology Center, it would aid our defense immeasurably."

"What's that?" I asked.

"The War Tech Center was created a few weeks ago, hidden—west of here. You'll be told where when the need arises. When you get the download." I thought for a moment. It couldn't be as far as Japan or China; Beijing and Tokyo were both destroyed. He must mean Hawaii.

I couldn't resist being a smart-ass; the President brought that out in people. "It's either Wheeler AFB, Kaneohe Bay Marine Corps Air Station, or Barber's Point Naval Air Station, all on Oahu," I declared. "Do I win anything?"

"I love Hawaii!" said Arlene. "Great weather.

Hardly any humidity."

"But those prices," I answered.

It was a trivial little protest against the man's pomposity and skepticism, but it made us feel a whole lot better.

"Please," said the President, his face turning positively florid. "As I was saying, if you can penetrate the enemy stronghold and bring the specs to the U.S. technology center, there are scientists there who can do something with it. We have refugees from ARPA, the Lockheed 'skunk works,' NASA, MacDAC, hackers from many places." It sounded to me like the President of the Twelve had been boning up on other subjects besides theology … and finance. "Has Albert told you about the force field?"

"He said something about an energy wall." "You have to find a way to shut it off… otherwise, you're not going anywhere. You get offshore about fifteen miles, then call an encrypted message in. We'll vector you to the War Technology Center." "If we can pull this off," said Arlene in her serious, engineer's tone of voice, "and a computer expert can dehack the alien technology, we might come up with shields against them. Defenses, something." "The first problem is to crack Los Angeles," said the President.

"Then we're your best bet," I said. "After Phobos and Deimos, how bad can L.A. be?" Even at the time, this sounded like famous last words.

"Yes, my point exactly," he agreed languidly, still frosted; "how much simpler this would have to be than the Deimos situation." He paused long enough to annoy us again.

“This is more than a two-man operation.” Translation: we needed keepers. Well, that was all right with me. “You’ll be infiltrating, so we’re not talking about a strike force here.” “Stealth mission,” said Arlene.

“Two more people would be about right,” I said. The President’s first choice was excellent. Albert wanted to go. “By way of apology for being the one to turn you in,” he said, holding out his big paw of a hand. I took it gingerly; he hardly had anything to apologize for. He winked.

“If you’d been one fraction less of a hard-ass, I wouldn’t want you on this mission anyway.” “This is probably a good time to tell you about Albert’s record,” said the President. “He was a PFC in the Marine Corps, I’m sure you’ll be pleased to hear. Honorably discharged. He won a medal for his MOS.” Military operational specialty.

“Which was?” I asked Albert, eye-to-eye. “A sniper, Corporal,” he answered. “Bronze star, Colombia campaign. Drug wars.”

“Sniper school?”

“Of course.”

“God bless.” said Arlene.

Albert was fine; we both dug Albert. Couldn’t say the same about the second choice, who Nate ushered into the ops room: she looked like a fourteen-year-old girl in T-shirt, jeans, and dirty sneakers. “Fly,” Arlene said, staring, “does my promise apply to bitching about personnel decisions?” “Say your piece.”

She shook her head in incredulity. “I’d never have expected this kind of crap from this bunch of sexist—“ “Uh, no offense,” I mumbled to the President, feeling pretty lame. My face flushed red-hot, as if I’d just taken niacin.

He chose to ignore the editorial. “I hate sending her. Unfortunately, she’s the best qualified.” Arlene stared at the girl, a foxy little item ready to stare back. “I never thought I’d say these words,” Arlene began, “but there’s a first time for everything.

Honey—”

“My name is Jill,” she said defiantly.

“Okay, Jill. Listen closely. Please don’t take offense, but this is no job for a girl.”

“I have to go,” she said. “Live with it.”

“Honey, I don’t want to die with it.”

“What’s this joke?” I demanded.

“I told you. She’s the best, uh, hacker, I think it is, that we’ve got. But you deserve an explanation.” He turned to her and asked, “Do you mind if I tell them?” She shrugged. He went on: “I apologize for her sullen attitude.”

I don’t know about Arlene, but I didn’t see anything sullen about the kid. The President never seemed to look directly at her but kind of sideways. “Back in the life, before her family moved here and accepted the faith, Jill was arrested twice for breaking into computer systems. She served six months in a juvenile detention center in Ojai; then her parents joined the Church and moved here.”

All the time he was talking, he kept sneaking glances out of the corner of his eye. He seemed to be looking at the top of her head. She was pretending not to be interested but hung on every word. “Jill was embarrassed and ashamed of her arrest and conviction,” the President said very slowly, as if coaching, watching her all the time. “She was locked up with a girl who was a prostitute and drug dealer—“ “She didn’t want to be a junkie-hooker,” said Jill, speaking about herself in the third person. The President pretended not to hear. “She still loves computers, but wants to be a security person now.” He took a breath, then concluded, “The aliens killed her parents, and only missed her because she was covered with blood and they assumed she was dead. She was frightened by the aliens, of course—“ “I hate them,” she piped in. “I want them all dead.”

“Good girl,” said Arlene, half won over. The Mormon leader approached Jill but was careful not to touch her. At least he finally looked at her. “You don’t like your former hacker buddies, do you?” he asked.

“I hate them.”

“Why?”

She was uncomfortable about talking but couldn’t keep the words from spilling out. “Because they don’t care about what happens to anyone else. They don’t give a rat’s ass if they hack a hospital computer and destroy a patient’s records, by accident, or as a joke.” “Some joke,” said Arlene.

“They’d only be upset if they did a sloppy job,” the girl replied, her voice monotonous. “They suck.” “God bless you, Jill,” said the President. “And you know what the aliens are?”

Jill sure did. “A million times worse. I’ve got to kill them all.”

Mother Mary, a regular little parrot! Did the President write the script out for her? I wondered. Or was she just adept at adlibbing what he wanted to hear, what would get her on the job?

“Don’t you think you should leave the killing to Albert and this other man?” asked the President. “That does it,” said Arlene, hackles smacking the ceiling.

“I’m sorry, but there’s no alternative to taking her along,” said the President.

“That’s not what I meant!” Arlene gave me her special look. I sighed, but didn’t shake my head or give her the shut-up signal. I’d had about all of the President I could take.

“Mr. President,” she began, speaking slowly as if to a child—I realized we still didn’t know his name—“I respect your beliefs, even though I don’t hold them myself. But we are in a situation where every able-bodied individual must do his or her best. There are armed women outside.”

“Yes,” he answered. “Adult women.”

Arlene turned to Jill. “I apologize for doubting you,” she said. “I think you’ll do fine.” She glared back at the President, who shook his head sadly. I smiled, suddenly realizing we’d been had: he had put on the whole “Mormon patriarch” act just to get us to accept a little girl as a teammate! It was masterful… and I didn’t say a word to Arlene. Let her keep her illusions.

“If you succeed,” concluded the President, “you will have redeemed yourself thrice over.” “And if we fail?”

“You’ll be dead. Or undead. Either way, you’ll never have to think about your error again.” Gee. Thanks a lump.

“What weapon do you have?” Arlene asked Jill. The fourteen-year-old picked up a slim box from the table; took me a moment to recognize it as a CompMac “Big Punk” ultramicro with a radio-telemetry port. That was some nice equipment; did she come with it, or did the President hijack it for her?

“You’ll train her in the use of firearms,” the President said, turned on his heel and walked away. “I’ve fired guns before,” said Jill.

Arlene touched the girl on the shoulder. Jill didn’t pull away. Arlene didn’t talk down to her. In a casual tone she asked, “Do you think there might be some pointers I could give you, hon?”

The fourteen-year-old smiled for the first time. She didn’t answer right away. Then she said in a firm voice, “Want some pizza?”

Now that she mentioned it, my mouth began to salivate.

12

I took my cue from Arlene and reluctantly accepted the kid. The Mormon leader guaranteed the girl's bona fides. Given the way he felt about the female of the species, if he wanted Jill on this mission that badly, that was good enough for me. "Welcome aboard," I said, approaching Jill and putting out my hand. I didn't expect anything, but she surprised me by shaking hands and smiling. Smart kid. She knew when she'd won a victory. "Thanks." Jill sized each of us up, letting her glance stay on me a little longer—not exactly pleased with the effect, I noticed. "I won't let you down," she said to all of us.

"How do you know?" asked Albert, but he wasn't being belligerent about it.

"Yeah," said Jill, not losing a beat. "They talk that way around here. I won't get anybody killed on purpose."

Arlene bent down and patted Jill on the head. The girl didn't pull away, but acted surprised. Affection was something new in her experience. I hoped she would live long enough to experience a lot more of it. But I didn't kid myself: once we entered Los Angeles, the mission was everything, and we were all expendable. It had been that way since the first monster came through the Gate on Phobos.

"Come on," said Arlene, taking Jill by the hand.

"Your training starts now."

Jerry had stayed with us after the boss sauntered off. "There might not be time for that," he said. He didn't say it as if he liked it. So far, the only person I'd met who impressed me as something of a jerk was the leader, and even he was no fool.

Arlene kept her voice even and calm. "We'll make time," she said. "Training is not a luxury." Looking at the man's face, I could see that he didn't like arguing with facts. He shrugged and didn't say another word.

"How about it, Albert?" I asked the other member of our team. "What kind of time do we have?" "Plenty," he said. "I've seen Jill shoot. She'll do fine."

"Do I get a gun of my own?" asked Jill.

"Does she?" Arlene asked Albert.

“Sure as shootin’,” he said, letting a moment pass before we responded to his wordplay. He enjoyed the double take.

We went to an aboveground arsenal. Seeing what they kept up top made me more anxious to see behind those doors downstairs. As it was, they wouldn’t notice the absence of Jill’s weapon of choice, though it was a little strange seeing the fourteen-year-old holding an AR-19 like she was used to it.

Jill noticed my expression. “We need all the fire-power we can get,” she said.

“You’re right. Let’s see what you can do with it.” And thank God she didn’t have her heart set on an AK-47. The kick would knock her on her butt. At least the AR-19 was a small enough caliber. There were plenty of places to shoot. We went to a makeshift range where someone had gotten hold of old monster movie posters. Jill chose one already pretty badly shot up: a horns-and-tail demon from an old British movie. It looked a lot like a hell-prince. One of the horns was shot out, but the other was still intact.

“I’ll take the bone on his head,” she announced. She missed with the first burst, pulling up and to the right; but she nearly shredded the target anyway. Arlene went over and whispered something in her ear. Jill smiled and tried again. This time the bursts were shorter and stayed on target. The demon’s second horn was history.

“What did you tell her?” I asked Arlene. I always appreciate a few well-chosen words.

“Girl talk,” she said, arching her dark eyebrows. “Kind of a shame to destroy these collector’s items,” I observed when we ran out of ammo. “No problem,” said Albert. “We have hundreds of these. The President used to visit the church in Hollywood, and we have a lot of contacts.” “How did I do?” asked Jill, bringing us back to the original point of the exercise.

“I thought I’d need to teach you something,” said Arlene. “Guess you’re mostly ready. Mostly.” The day was shaping up nicely. We could do a whole lot worse than Jill.

I was still in a good mood when we had dinner with the President that night. They set a good table, and he boasted how they could keep this up for a long time. After dinner, Jill toddled off to bed in the female-teens quarter. Albert wanted to spend time with an older woman we’d been informed was an aunt, and I managed to get Arlene alone in the presidential garden.

Although night had fallen, the security lights in the garden were bright, thanks to the generators of our hosts. I saw Arlene frowning in thought. “Albert may have an extra

mission," she said, "scouting out new converts for the Church."

I laughed. "Hey, don't make it sound so sinister. We should ask any survivors to join us, male or female." "Unless they've gone insane," she said, "and there are parts of Los Angeles where it would be difficult to know."

"Well, I'm glad we have Albert and Jill with us." She brightened. "Me too. That young lady impresses the hell out of me. Maybe she's lucky to be going off with us to face demons and imps." Arlene never lost her ability to surprise me.

"Lucky?" I echoed. "Why do you say that?" "She's past puberty, Fly. They'd probably marry her off to one of these …" She didn't finish. I recognized that the conversation was on the slippery slope to more trouble than a barrel of pumpkins. Arlene's prejudice against anything and everything religious, and especially against Mormons, was disturbing; the people in this compound, Mormons and others alike, had done nothing to warrant such anger. Time for a strategic retreat. "So, what do you think of the President?"

"What do you think?" she threw it back at me. "Well, as I've said before, you don't have to like someone in power to recognize that you need cooperation from the boss. This man is no fool; he's playing his own game."

Arlene shook her head, but it wasn't because she disagreed with me. "I always understand a leader," she said. "It's the followers who confuse me. This man is a master of transferring authority. His followers won't argue with someone who says he gets his marching orders direct from God."

"Yeah, but in the war we're about to fight, let's hope God really is on our side. Or we're on God's side, I mean."

She took a stick of gum out of her pocket, popped the contents in her mouth, and gave forth with her considered opinion: "Agreed. Any god, any goddess, anything to give us an edge is fine by me." I ignored the blasphemy. Honestly, she does it just to needle me. "Where did you get the gum?" I asked. "Jill," she said between chews. "Want a stick?" "No thanks." Gum is not one of my vices. But I was impressed with how quickly Arlene had been won over.

We went back in the compound, expecting to return to the room we'd been in before. A matronly woman we hadn't seen before greeted us. "Hello, my name is Marie," she said. "I'm here to show the young woman to the female quarters."

Arlene and I exchanged knowing glances. I think we both did a commendable job of not bursting out laughing. I couldn't remember the last time I'd slept without Arlene taking watch. We'd already been through the sexual-tension zone and popped out the other end with the understanding that we were buddies, pals, comrades.

But now we were back in the Adam and Eve department. The only question that really mattered was, did we trust these guys to keep us alive while we slept? The fact that they were still here was pretty good evidence.

"What kind of security do you have here?" I asked the woman.

She didn't understand. "Good enough to keep you out of the henhouse," she answered with a slight smirk.

I rolled my eyes. That wasn't what I meant, but—ah, skip it.

"See you in the morning," I said to Arlene. For the first time in a long time, I was alone. Maybe the President still had doubts about me, but they put me on a long leash.

Suddenly I realized I didn't know where I was supposed to sleep. The room we'd been in before made sense. We'd been allowed to use it when we freshened up, but we were under guard then. I wished I'd thought to ask the woman if that was where I was supposed to go.

I didn't know anyone in the hallways, but they didn't pay any attention to me as I went past; they weren't afraid … what a strange concept that had become. I could have asked them about a men's quarters, but I wasn't in a rush to have the old YMCA experience if I could avoid it. If I wasn't going to bunk with Arlene, then I wanted to be alone. Privacy suddenly exerted a strong appeal: to be alone without a hell-prince stomping on my face, to sleep without worry of a zombie who used to be a friend cuddling up next to me and sharing the rot of the grave, just to enjoy silence and solitude, without spinys fudging it up. Yeah, the more I thought of it, the better I liked it.

I retraced my way back to the room. After the corridors on Deimos, this was almost too easy. The door wasn't locked. Then I noticed that the lock had been removed. Now that I thought about it, there were no locks anywhere. But the room was empty, gloriously empty, and that was good enough. I went in, closed the door, flipped on the light. There was a miracle. The light came on. No conservation or blackout measures in this small, windowless room. Which meant I could do something more important than sleeping.

The book was where I'd left it. Normally, the Book of Mormon would not be my first choice of reading material; the sisters would not approve. Under the circumstances, I

was grateful to have it. I started at the beginning, with the testimonies of the witnesses and the testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith. This told the story of the finding of the gold plates with the Holy Book written thereon. Reminded me of the old joke about the founding of the Unitarian Church: a prophet found gold plates on which was written … absolutely nothing!

As I read, I remembered an old Hollywood movie about Joseph Smith and Brigham Young, founders of the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-Day Saints. Hollywood … where we would be going. Hollywood was in the hands of the monsters. Vincent Price starred in the Mormon movie and also in a million monster movies. I was sure this all meant something. I started the first book, made it to the second and the third; and kept reading until I reached Chapter Five in the Book of Alma, Verse 59:

For what shepherd is there among you having many sheep doth not watch over them, that the wolves enter not and devour his flock? And behold, if a wolf enter his flock doth he not drive him out? Yea, and at the last, if he can, he will destroy him.

That seemed like a good place to stop because I doubted I would find a more agreeable sentiment anywhere else in the Mormon scriptures.

13

Did you sleep well?" Arlene asked, winking. "Not bad," I said. "I think it's the first night I didn't dream about monsters."

The sun was up, the sky was clear, and for a moment it was possible to believe that none of this had ever happened. A dog ran by, a healthy mutt that someone was feeding —not a sign of impending starvation, but perhaps an overgenerous use of resources. "Guess what?" she said with an impish smile. "I didn't dream about monsters either. But I did dream."

Teasing was simply not Arlene's style. She really surprised me. "Maybe that's why they segregate the boys and the girls," I said. "To make everyone think about it."

"We can't keep any secrets from you," said Albert, joining us outside the main cafeteria.

"Except the ones that count," I replied, not altogether innocently. I was still thinking about secrets and closed doors, and an unknown, upcoming mission.

"Where's Jill?" asked Arlene.

"Already inside, having breakfast," he said. "We should join her. Afterward, we'll receive our briefing." It had been a long, long time since I'd eaten pancakes, with real maple syrup yet. I didn't think I'd be able to get coffee in Salt Lake City, but there was plenty of it for those with the morning caffeine monkey on their back. This was a pretty trivial monster in the grand scheme of things.

And then we got down to business. We returned to the ops room from the day before. The President was waiting for us dressed in a conservative black suit. He could've passed as an undertaker, not the most inspiring image to send us off to California. "The entire state of California is in enemy hands," he said, then led us over to a map of the relevant states. Red lines marked all the existing train tracks. "There used to be a high speed train between L.A. and Salt Lake City. We destroyed the train to prevent the aliens from sending us a cargo of themselves. I refuse to refer to those creatures as soldiers. We also thought the train might be used to send us an atomic bomb." "Would they even know how to use the trains?" asked Arlene.

"You fought them, didn't you? They can use anything we can. Machinery is machinery. It offends me how they used our own, God-given atomic weapons against us. We are

fortunate the radiation and poisons have not contaminated this area. God has intervened." Atomic, not nuclear; an interesting word choice.

"We'll be going into radiation?" asked Jill. She had not thought of this until now.

"You'll be entering undestroyed areas, and our scientists tell us that the invaders have neutralized much of the fallout in the areas they control." Arlene interrupted, as usual. "When we fought them on Phobos and Deimos, they were comfortable with higher radiation levels than a human being; but that doesn't mean they could survive H-bomb fallout."

For a moment I thought the President was going to bite her head off, but then he controlled his temper. "We have antiradiation pills for you to take and wrist bands that will glow red if you get a near-lethal dose. In addition, you'll have some protective gear if you require it. And any weapons you can bear, of course." "How do we get to L.A.?" I asked.

"Take the train," answered Albert.

"Great. How do we get to the tracks? I thought they were all ripped up."

"Not all the track was destroyed," said the President. "You can take one of our Humvees south, following the railroad track to a good spot for getting aboard the train." Getting aboard… How easily he breezed over that slight difficulty!

And another small difficulty. "Um … the aliens are going to let us drive right out in a Humvee?" Albert snorted. The President glowered at him, then returned to the question. "Of course not. You'll leave here and pass underneath enemy lines. The Humvee is hidden in a safe location—Albert knows where it is."

"I do?"

"Where you hid after blowing the tracks three weeks ago."

"Ah." Albert nodded, remembering the spot. Well, that made one of us.

"Underneath the aliens," I asked, "you have a tunnel?"

"It's always wise to build in a way to expedite escape," said Albert. "All our safe houses use them—including this facility. Usually exit from a basement, dive down thirty or forty feet, then continue a long way, miles perhaps."

“How did you build all that without anyone knowing?”

“We had a lot of time on our hands.” He grinned. “And a lot of members in street maintenance positions.”

“You must ride the train into Phoenix,” continued the President, producing a pointer and stabbing Phoenix.

“Why Phoenix?” asked Arlene.

“The train that goes from Phoenix into L.A. can’t be stopped and can’t be boarded; Phoenix is under demonic possession. If you stow away before Phoenix and escape detection, you might not be boarded. Then it’s smooth riding all the way into L.A.” He put down the pointer with a flourish.

Jill laughed. She sounded a lot older than she was, listening to the scorn in her laugh; it suggested a lifetime of frustration.

The President did not act as defensive as I would have expected. “I know it’s a long shot,” he said. “I’m open to any better suggestions.”

“I wish I had one,” said Albert.

I expected Jill to launch into a tirade, but instead she kept her mouth taped.

“The plan sounds workable to me,” I said. “Everything is a long shot from now on.”

At no point had anyone talked about who would lead this mission; I suspected the President would want his own man in charge, and I prepared myself for an argument.

Then Albert surprised me: “Corporal Taggart is in charge, of course.” He surprised the President too, who started to object, then bit off whatever he’d been about to say. Leadership was clearly already determined.

The President allowed us to pick our own weapons: a double-barreled scattergun for me, and a .41 caliber hunting rifle with a scope for long-range work. Arlene was back to her perennial AB-10 machine pistol and a scoped .30-30. Albert surprised me by picking some foreign-made Uzi clone I’d never seen before; I didn’t think a Marine would go in for that kind of flash. But 1 guess it wasn’t really different from Arlene’s AB-10, though a bit bigger; and even that might give it more stability in a firefight. Albert said he would just use Arlene’s .30-30 for any sniping … and Jill already had her AR-19, of course.

We also took pistols, ammo, grenades, day-to-night goggles—we had to be careful to conserve the battery power, using them only when absolutely necessary; no recharges—and one of the more exotic energy weapons I never liked; not a BFG, which they'd never heard of, but a gas-plasma pulse rifle. We packed food and blankets and other useful items, including a complement of mountaineering (or wall-scaling) equipment: knotted rope, a grappling hook, crampons and pitons, the usual usual.

The Humvee waited—God and Albert knew where. Would we find it? Would it run if we did? I tried not to think about such questions as, with great solemnity, the President of the Twelve led us through the inner compound to a small, cinder-block building … and to the escape tunnel.

14

Other members of the community gathered around us before we departed. Somewhere back in my mind, I wondered why we weren't hearing a heroic anthem to speed us on our way. Where was the brass band? Where were the speeches? In my mind, I heard fragments of the speech: "Never before have so few faced so many in the defense of so few." Well, that wasn't exactly right.

There were a large number of heavy barrels of fuel oil in the building, seemingly stacked somewhat hap-hazardly. A pair of soldiers approached one particular barrel carrying an odd tool that looked like a giant-sized jar opener.

They lowered the prongs over the barrel and pushed levers forward, running steel rods through the lip. Then they put their shoulders to the two ends of the "jar opener" and walked counterclockwise. Rather than tip over, the barrel unscrewed like a light bulb; they lifted the heavy, false barrel from the narrow tunnel, just barely wide enough to admit a single man of my size.

Arlene took point. She tchked and winked at the President and blew him a kiss; his face flushed bright red. Then she held her AB-10 pointed straight down and dropped out of sight. Albert followed, then Jill; I went last.

We dropped into what looked at first like pitch-dark; then, as our eyes adjusted, we found the slight ambient light adequate to see a few meters ahead and behind.

The light came from phosphorescent mold, and the tunnel was deliberately carved to look natural, a fissure meandering left and right but mainly going straight northwest. It was wide enough for two abreast, and Arlene and Albert walked the point—

Albert because he alone knew the route. I took tail-end Charlie, leaving Jill reasonably protected in the center.

Before we started, I cautioned the crew: "From here on, no talking, not even for emergencies. We'll use the Marine Corps hand language; Jill, you just watch me. They may have listening devices, hunting for tunnels.

Let's not make it easy on them, all right?" The tunnel was cool and dark, a relief from the hot sun of the Utah desert; at night, I hoped it would also insulate us from the

freezing overnight temps. We could be underground for … how many klicks? Eight kilometers, signed Albert in response to my silent question.

Six passed by at breakneck speed … well, as breakneck as you can get shimmying through underground caverns with rough, natural-hewn floors in limited light. Took us more than six hours, in fact, not much of a speed record. But the end was in sight, metaphorically speaking. We had just finished our fourth rest and were ready to tackle the final quarter. As Arlene ducked and stepped under an archway, I heard a sound that chilled me to the marrow: the startled hiss of an imp.

We were not alone.

Reacting to the sound, Arlene backpedaled; she stuck her arm out and caught Albert on her way back, knocking both of them to the ground.

The move saved their lives; a flaming ball of mucus hurled past where they had stood but an instant before and splattered explosively against the wall. Arlene didn't bother rising; she raised her machine pistol and fired from supine. I swung my shotgun around and unloaded the outside barrel; between the two of us, we blew the spiny apart.

It had buddies. As Arlene and Albert scrambled to their feet, and the latter fumbled his Uzi clone, swearing under his breath in a most un-Mormonlike manner, I pushed Jill to the ground and unloaded my second barrel, decapitating a zombie who wielded a machete.

I cracked and reloaded; Albert finally got everything pointed in the right direction and loosed a volley of lead.

We had surprised the bastards, and now they weren't even sure where we were shooting from. To make things worse, the zombie troops had zeroed in on the imps, catching them in a cross fire with us. I pushed Arlene forward, and she charged, taking advantage of the distraction. Yanking Jill to her feet, I followed; but we were several steps behind our team-mates.

Arlene broke left and Albert kept on straight, taking after the two clumps of spinys—who made the fatal mistake of turning their attention to their own pathetic troops.

To my horror, I realized what this resistance meant: the tunnel was breached; if the aliens knew about the tunnel, then soon troops would come pouring down the pipe, lurching directly into the heart of the last human enclave for hundreds of klicks!

Albert must have realized the terrible danger at the same moment. He took advantage of a lull to flash a frantic sign: explosives—tunnel—blow up—hurry! I got the message. The Mormons had intelligently lined their own escape tunnel with high explosive; if we could somehow find the detonator, we could collapse the tunnel, saving the compound. But how? Where? I doubted even Albert knew where the nearest fuse lay—and wouldn't blowing the tunnel blow us up as well?

But considering that it was I who brought this trouble upon them, it was clearly my duty to do it… even at the loss of my own life in the explosion. But first we'd have to take care of these brown, leathery bastards.

Arlene had gone left and Albert straight; but one imp suddenly lurched out of the darkness to our right out of nowhere. I caught it out of the corner of my eye. "Jill!" I shouted, violating my own orders. "Look out!"

Fortunately, like Rikki Tikki Tavi, she knew better than to waste time looking. She hit the deck face first as I unloaded both barrels over her body. The imp landed nearly on top of the girl. If it had, it probably would have crushed her to death: those damned demons mass 150 kilograms!

Arlene and Albert finished killing their targets, and I started to relax.

Then I noticed what the imp I had just killed held in its claws. Damn, but it sure looked suspiciously like a satchel charge.

For an instant I froze, then that little voice behind my eyeballs whispered, Fly, you know, standing like a statue might not be the best career move right about now…

"RUN!" I bellowed, bolting straight forward, picking up Jill on the fly. I ran right up to the imp and right over it, gritting my teeth against the expected blast.

It didn't blow up. Not until we had all made about ten meters down the tunnel.

The explosion was loud, but not deafening; it was the sequence of seven or eight explosions after the satchel charge that rattled my brains.

We kept running like bloody lunatics as we heard the loudest report yet. It sounded like it was directly over our heads—and the tunnel began to collapse. A million tons of rock and dirt crashed down on my head, and something hard and remarkably bricklike cracked my skull. I was hurled to the ground by the concussion … and when I swam back to consciousness, I found myself lying half underneath a huge pile of collapsed tunnel roof. Had we been just a few footfalls slower, we'd have all been buried under

it. A steel brace arched up from our position, slightly bent. About five meters overhead I saw daylight; but ahead of us there was only rubble.

“Congratulations,” gasped Arlene, picking herself up and choking in the dust. “You found the only door frame for a hundred meters in each direction! You sure you never lived in L.A., say during an earth-quake?”

No one was crippled; Jill needed first aid for a nasty cut on her forehead, and I needed about five or six Tylenols.

Albert stared forward into the collapse, then up at the sky. “Course correction, Corporal,” he said. “I think it’s time we rose above all this.” We made a human ladder: I stood at the bottom, then Albert on my shoulders, then Arlene on his. Reaching up, she caught hold of the bracing beam and held herself steady for Jill to climb like a monkey up and out. She secured a rope and threw the end back down for the rest of us.

Outside, the sun was just setting, a faint flash of green in the western sky. The exploding, collapsing tunnel left a long, plowed furrow running jaggedly along the hard-packed dirt of the desert floor. We hurried away from the site, found a rocky hill and lay on our bellies on its top. When the stars appeared, Albert sighted on Polaris, then pointed the direction we should journey. “The ranch is another four klicks yonder,” he said. “We ought to be there before midnight.”

Three hours later we skulked onto the deserted, burned-out ranch. Near the barn was a huge haystack. Inside the haystack, covered in a yellow, plastic tarp, was a surprise.

Ordinarily, I’d have rather run during the night and holed up in the daylight; but the aliens were more active at night. And more important, we were all utterly spent. Arranging a three-way watch over Jill’s protest, we collapsed into sleep. Despite her threat, Jill didn’t awaken until Arlene shook her the next morning.

The engine of the Humvee groaned into life, the coughing gradually diminishing. The thing might actually run, I thought. Jill almost jumped up and down with excitement as the machine started to move. She was a kid again, forgetting all the crap of the universe in the presence of a new toy. The little things that bothered her sense of dignity vanished. She was why we would win the war against the monsters, no matter how many battles were lost. And no matter what happened to us.

“Here we go,” said Albert, holding an Auto Club map as if it were a dagger. He was a lot more dashing than the President.

“Let’s kick some monster butt,” said the old Arlene.

After two hours of a steady, off-road seventy kilometers per hour, we'd seen no signs of the changed world; but I knew this illusion couldn't last. While it did, I enjoyed every minute of it. An empty landscape is the most beautiful sight in the world when it doesn't contain smashed buildings, burning remains of civilization, and fields of human corpses. Of course, it would have been nice to see a bird, or hear one. There was a long line of straight road ahead, so I asked Jill if she would like to drive the Humvee. "Cool," she said. "What do I do?"

I let her hold the wheel, and she seemed satisfied. A Humvee is a big horse, and I wasn't about to put the whole thing in her charge. But she seemed comfortable, as if she had driven large vehicles before , . . possibly a tractor?

Our first stop was for a bathroom break. That's when I saw the first evidence that Earth wasn't what it used to be: a human skull all by itself, half buried in the dirt. Nothing else around it—no signs of a struggle. But dislodging it with my shoe revealed a small patch of clotted scalp still on the bone. The ants crawling over this spot provided the final touch. What was this fresh skull doing here all by itself? "Ick," said Jill, catching sight of my find. I could say nothing to improve on that.

"What's that odor?" asked Arlene.

"It's coming from up ahead," observed Albert. It was the familiar, old sour lemon smell… unmistakable bouquet of finer zombies everywhere. As we resumed the journey, the terrain altered. There were twisted shapes on the horizon made of something pink and white that glistened in the sun. They reminded me of the flesh blocks that might still be pounding endlessly up and down on Deimos. These were shaped more like the stalagmites I'd seen in my spelunking days. They didn't belong out here. The whiff of sour lemon grew stronger, which meant zombies shambling nearby or rotting in a ditch somewhere close. My stomach churned in a way it hadn't since Deimos.

The sky altered as well. The blue slowly shaded into a sickly green with a few red streaks, as if pools of green sludge were leaking into the sky. We were all quiet now, fearing that to say anything was to ruin that last glow of quiet friendship before the storm. I glanced at Jill. She wore a determined expression better than the President of the Council of Twelve wore his gun.

Arlene and Albert checked out the ammo and guns, more for something to do. Jill was content to stay up front and help drive the vehicle.

Arlene finally broke silence: "You know, Fly, they gave us more than we can pack with us when we dump the Humvee, if we're going to be able to stow aboard the damned train when it slows down."

“Yeah,” I said. “Take what you can.”

Jill looked over her shoulder. “Can I help?” she asked.

“We’re doing okay,” said Albert.

“You’re not throwing out my machine gun, are you?” she asked suspiciously.

Albert laughed, the first sound of happiness since we crossed over into what I was already dubbing Infernal Earth. “Honey, we’ll toss food and water before we let go of a good weapon.”

“My name’s not—“ she started to say, then noticed Albert’s friendly expression. Context and tone of voice made a difference. I wouldn’t be surprised if we weren’t the first people in her life to treat her like a person.

There was the sound of an explosion to the west. “Is that thunder?” asked Jill. She stared to the right, but there was nothing to see.

“No,” I said. “Someone is playing with fire-crackers.”

“Something, more likely,” said Arlene.

“Behold,” said Albert in a low voice, obviously speaking to himself, “that great city Zarahemla have I burned with fire, and the inhabitants thereof.” Jill suddenly surprised me by turning around and facing Albert, asking: “Are you saying the monsters are a judgment of God against the human race?” “No,” he said, “I think it is a testing.” Arlene had promised not to talk religion with the boss. Now the circumstances had changed. Albert was a comrade. She’d talk about anything to a comrade. “Would you say what the Nazis did to the Jews was a testing?” she asked angrily.

“The most important lesson from what Hitler did to the Jews,” he said calmly, “was that at the end of the war, they were still in the world. I’d call that a testing, one they passed by surviving when the ‘Thousand Year Reich’ was destroyed. If they’d been destroyed, it would have been a judgment.” Arlene fumed at Albert, but didn’t say anything. Obviously, his answer irritated her at some level, but she couldn’t think of an intelligent response. “In space,” she said finally, “on Phobos, we found a giant swastika.” She let her observation hang in the air, waiting for the Mormon to respond. “What do you think it means?” he asked. Arlene sighed. “I don’t know; except it’s a reason for me to hate them more.”

“I would hate them just as much,” said Albert, “if you had found the cross up there, or the flag of the United States, which I believe was also inspired by God. A symbol used by aliens means nothing to me. We know them by their fruits.”

“Oh, fug,” said Jill. “This is like being back in class.

Don’t give me a test, Albert.”

I figured it was a good time to move on. “I’m with Albert,” I said. “Symbols mean nothing outside of their context. But I never expected to hear that from a religious guy!”

“I’m full of mysteries,” he said.

I was glad for our little debate. It took our mind off the fact that the sky kept changing. It was now completely green. Made me think of fat frogs and mold. The lemon stench was bad enough that it seemed the same as back on Deimos and Phobos. I had forgotten how after a while you get used to anything and then you could ignore it.

Albert reminded us he was in charge of the map by pointing out we were nearing the sabotage point. “I’d say we’re a mile away,” he said.

“Let me take the wheel back, Jill.” The kid didn’t argue, glad to say. I started slowing down the Humvee.

“We need to tip it over on the tracks just past that curve,” said Albert. “We don’t want to derail the train.”

“Right,” I said. “They should see it in plenty of time after they come around the bend.”

“Have you given any thought to how we’re going to tip this monster over?” asked Arlene. “It must weigh a couple of tons.”

“I sure have. That’s why I brought along—Block and Tackle in a Drum!”

She didn’t seem to appreciate the humor.

15

No, really, A.S. I'm not joking."

"I'm not laughing."

I held up the drum.

Arlene squinted. "C-4? Plastic explosive?" "Just a soupcon. A bit of spice for an otherwise drab mission."

The others stood back at a safe distance as I parked the vehicle next to the tracks, molded a goodly glob on both front and rear left tires, then rolled it forward until the C-4 was against the ground. I fused both bunches with identical lengths of det cord, lay flat and closed the connection.

Jill covered her ears; clever kid.

The Humvee is normally one of the most stable-wheeled vehicles ever built; but even its wide body and long wheel base was never meant to stand up to a double charge beneath the left side. With a flash and a bang, the C-4 did its job: the wheels blew off, but not before the entire vehicle jerked into the air and rolled along the longitudinal axis, landing upside down on the rails. I held my breath as it skittered and spun—but it came to rest still blocking the tracks. I even had more C-4, just in case we'd needed a slight adjustment.

"That wasn't too tough," declared Arlene, standing with hands on hips, surveying the undercarriage. "Of course you'd say that," I complained, "after letting me do all the work."

"You! You mean you and Charlie Four!"

"What do we do now?" asked Jill.

"We guard the gear," I said, "and hurry up and wait. Hey, welcome to the armed forces." "Inconsiderate of the fiends not to post their schedules for us," said Albert.

"Amen," agreed Arlene, to Albert's amusement. I had expected her to say something sarcastic in reply, but she patted him on the arm. They really seemed to like each other. Maybe their argument over Judgment Day was a test for each other.

The idea, of course, was for us to climb aboard when the train stopped to clear the tracks. We'd stay back until it started to move again; then we'd take a running leap and catch the ladders, humping up to the roof.

I was worried about Jill; I had no idea whether she could make the jump; and if she missed … But she was a wiry kid and looked like a tomboy. All the same, I quietly removed everything heavy from her pack, including her CompMac ultramicro; couldn't afford to let her drop it under the wheels … or drop herself.

"Can I put my ear to the track and listen for the vibration?" asked Jill. "I saw that in a movie." "You don't think you'll fall asleep?" I asked back.

"It could be a long wait."

She assumed the position and managed to stay down for a good twenty minutes before flipping over and trying the other ear. Fifteen minutes after that she decided that it could be a long wait and joined us over by the stuff, around the hill.

"Why do they have to change the sky?" Jill asked. "I don't know," said Arlene, "but it makes me appreciate the night. At least we won't see the green then."

Albert passed around some beef jerky. We had plenty of water and didn't have to worry about rationing yet. We carried chlorine pills to purify the water, which wouldn't help much if the aliens poisoned it with some nerve toxin.

Jill poked Albert. "Why do you think these are demons if they can be killed?"

He looked at me, raising his brows.

"Don't give me a hard time," I said. "I haven't discussed it with her. She can think for herself, you know."

"There are greater and lesser powers," he said. "There is nothing wrong with viewing these creatures as alien invaders as our Marine friends do. But we believe they would not have taken on these guises unless they were directed by genuine demonic forces."

"Then why don't we exercise them?" said Jill.

Arlene smiled. "You mean exorcise, Jill." "I like exercise better," I interjected. "Some of these monsters seem out of shape to me. We should capture one and PT the hell out of it." "Speaking of which—" Albert began, but he didn't have to finish. The train whistle

was high and loud, a lonely call from the remnants of our world. “I don’t think you’ll need to place your ear to the track,” I told Jill.

First, there was the rumbling. Then it came around the bend, bigger than life, the engine the head of a dragon, each car behind it a segment of spinal cord. Thousands of tons rushed toward our little Humvee, lying across the dark rails like a sacrificial offering. “It’s not slowing down,” whispered Jill. There was no way the man or monster in the engine couldn’t see the obstacle in the path of the train. The natural reaction was to slow and stop.

Instead, they chose the unnatural reaction—dispelling any doubts about what sort of creature was driving. The monsters were among us.

The damned train sped up! The drone of the giant diesel electric motors drowned out the world, sinking our great plan beneath drifts of sand as if drowning in that dry ocean.

Jill moved forward, still going to give it a try; but no way would I let her commit suicide. I grabbed her arm hard and shouted, “Back off, everyone!” If that behemoth came off the tracks, it could explode and obliterate us like bugs. I had other plans, foremost among them to stay alive.

We ran, the roaring of metalon-metal and groaning diesels directly behind us. We felt the impact of the collision before we heard it, as the vibration tuning-forked through the desert into the soles of our feet and up to our hearts. The sound ripped through my head, made my teeth ache, and squeezed my lungs with the weight of the crash.

Bible stories ran through my head, the good old King James version, with the Old Testament warnings and massacres. Lot’s wife looked behind her after the Lord God told her not to. She was too curious for her own good—my kind of woman. I couldn’t resist a backward glance either.

The train plowed through the Humvee like it wasn’t even there except as a sound effect. Pieces of our transportation flew at us, and I realized there was a certain wisdom to Bible stories. This crap could sever our necks and smash us to pulp. You could actually hurt an eye.

We kissed dirt, and something whizzed past my right ear, but I had no curiosity to see what it was. Finally, the dangerous sounds went away. Standing up to see the remains of our vehicle, I checked that my three buddies weren’t bleeding or buried under hunks of twisted metal. The receding train reeled drunkenly from rail to rail, like an Iowa farm boy with a snootful on his first night of liberty. I half expected to see a fat, red demon riding in the caboose, leaning out and giving us the finger. Then again, a good number of

these beasties lacked the digits and dexterity to perform such a feat. “So,” said Arlene, after a long, dramatic pause.

“What’s Plan B?”

Jill occupied herself spitting out a mouthful of dirt, while Albert helped her to her feet. “Liabilities,” I said: “no Humvee; no train.”

“Assets?”

“We’re alive; we still have our weapons.”

“Feets do your stuff,” said Albert.

“We’ll hike into Phoenix,” I said. “It’s already late afternoon. Better for us to travel by night anyway, especially on foot.”

“Great,” said Jill, but when she didn’t continue the complaint, I let it slide. A little bitching from the troops can have its salutary effects.

Whatever the green crap in the atmosphere was, it didn’t prevent the stars coming out, although the twinkle was a bit weird. Footsore and weary, we took our first rest stop at midnight.

“My first girlfriend lived in Scottsdale,” said Albert. “I always enjoyed Arizona.”

“Was she a Mormon?” Arlene blurted out. “No; I’m a convert. We didn’t believe in much of anything, not even each other.”

“Why do you like Arizona?” asked Arlene. “The desert is clean. The mountains are clean. And best of all, there’s no humidity.”

“You sound like a travel folder,” I said.

“Not anymore,” he sighed.

“We’ll get our world back, Albert,” said Arlene. An attack of commanditis seized Yours Truly: “If we’re going to save the Earth, then we need to sleep, in shifts.” I took first watch so everyone else could sleep, but Jill joined me.

“I can’t sleep,” she said, “so don’t try and make me.”

“No, I’m glad for your company,” I said. “I hate wasting the rest of the night, and I’m not tired either. When Albert and Arlene wake up, I’m thinking we should move on.”

“Fine with me,” she said. “I think they’re sweet on each other.”

I stared at Jill, wondering where the hell that comment came from. I didn’t say a word, but the teenager had given me something to think about besides how many rounds it took to put down a spidermind.

Absolutely nothing else happened for four days, except Arlene and Albert spent a lot of time arguing, leaving me to debate computer ethics with the fourteen-year-old net-cop of the month. Jill was down on even the slightest infraction against privacy … by anyone.

It was dawn on the fifth day when we arrived on the outskirts of Phoenix. A number of buildings were rubble, but some were still standing. We decided to hole up in one of those. With weapons loaded and in hand, we moved in. I was pleased to note Jill handled herself well. This was good. If anything happened, I’d be too busy to hold anyone’s hand.

In the first alley we entered, we ran into an appetizer of three pathetic zombies. Albert, Arlene, and I acted so quickly that Jill didn’t even get off a shot—but it was her first contact with the enemy. We rounded the corner and found ourselves in the enviable position of staring at three zombie backs. It was two males and a female; one of the males a civilian, the other an Army sergeant, and the woman used to be a cop in life.

Any qualms I had ever had about shooting women in the back were burned out of me up on Phobos. Phobos meant “fear,” and fear was a marvelous teacher. Without a word, I swung my double-barreled shotgun up to my shoulder, sighted as if aiming for a clay pigeon, and let fly with the outer trigger. The living-dead female cop pitched forward without a sound, her head vanishing in a haze of red and green blood and gray brain matter. The other two growled and started to turn, but the soldier-zombie took two taps in the head from Arlene before he got even halfway around. She kept her AB-10 on single-shot; no sense wasting ammo.

The third zombie was armed only with a stick of some sort; it looked like it used to be a gas station attendant. It shambled toward us, unafraid, of course; its only desire was to beat us into a bloody pulp and perhaps eat the remains.

Jill whimpered and sank to one knee, fumbling her AR-19 around. Her numb, nerveless hands shook, and she suddenly had not even the strength to pull back the T-bar and cock the weapon.

Well, no reason to dump a death on her conscience, even a zombie death; she'd have plenty more chances. Sparing her a friendly glance, I raised my shotgun again, the outer barrel still unfired. But Albert beat me to the punch, expertly firing a quick, three-round burst that caught the zombie in the face, destroying it instantly. The guy was good: he had literally fired from the hip on rock 'n' roll and tapped it perfectly. I stole a look; his face was grim, determined. I had no trouble believing he had been a sniper. The soup course consisted of five imps who were attracted by the noise. Given the time of day, thinking of breakfast would be more appropriate. Time to fry the bacon.

They came shuffling around the corner, already wadding up balls of flaming snot. One was a fast mother; it heaved its flame wad before we could get off a shot, and Arlene had to hit the deck to evade. I heard a snik-click, as Jill finally ran the slide, cocking the hammer and slamming a round into the chamber.

I discharged my remaining barrel, knocking an imp to the dirt; it was still alive. I crabbed sideways, cracking the breech and sliding two more shells inside, while Albert fired short bursts, alternating between the nearest imps. Each burst drove the target backward a few steps.

Then a dead-eye spiny from the back ranks chucked a mucus ball over the front ranks, catching Albert on the shoulder. It splattered across his armor, still burning, and he yelped and dropped the Uzi clone. Arlene got to one knee, clicked the lever one notch down, and began firing bursts at the still-advancing imps. She focused fire on one imp at a lime, taking them down.

One of them slid by us somehow; none of us saw the damned thing. All of a sudden I turned and it was in my face, hissing and screaming like death on two legs.

16

I backpedaled but took a piece of flame wad in the face anyway. Blinded and agonized, I dropped the shotgun to the pavement and grabbed my face, screaming. I heard and felt the 180-kilogram monster looming over me, and I steeled myself to take a savage swipe to the ribs.

The swipe never came. I heard the high-pitched "rim shot" sound of the AR-19 discharging on full auto, and the monster pitched forward against me. I rolled to slip it as it fell; I sure didn't want to get crushed underneath.

By the time I was able to blink my eyesight back, the rest of the spinys were room-temp … and Jill stood over the body of her very first kill, managing to look simultaneously triumphant, sick, and scared to death.

"Congratulations, girl," I croaked, still grimacing at the pain, "virgin no more."

"Thanks." She looked as ambivalent as she probably would in a couple of years, when she lost the other form of virginity … unless I'm showing my age by presuming she hadn't already.

My mistake; one of the critters wasn't quite dead. When we huddled to assess damages, it leapt to its feet and took off down the alley. Arlene, the Hermes of the group, bolted after the thing, Albert hot on her heels.

We raced the imp. I'd never seen one move this fast before. Was it that this one had the sense to be afraid, or had the genetic engineering made some improvements?

The imp scooted around a corner. Arlene followed, then Albert, and finally Yours Truly. Jill was somewhere behind.

We spied an open door across the alley, and Arlene and Albert made a beeline for it; but I noticed a nearby trailer was rocking back and forth, as if someone had just entered.

"Over here!" I yelled. I wasn't used to an imp doing something as clever as opening a door to mislead his pursuers before doubling back to his real objective; but then I hadn't expected the imp on Phobos to talk either.

The door was locked, but a trailer door hardly merited the waste of ammo. As I started to kick it, I heard a familiar sound. Once you've heard the humming-whizzing sound of a

teleporter, you never forget it.

One good thump and we were in; a few sparks of light hung in space over the rectangular piece of metal. “Damn,” I said.

“Shazam!” said Arlene.

“Huh?” asked Albert.

“Just making a little joke before your time,” she said.

“Hey, I’ve had friends who take that stuff,” Albert countered. “It’s bad stuff, ma’am.”

“We’ll get into the cross-cultural discussion later, kids,” I said. “Right now we have more important problems. Like, should we follow this one or leave well enough alone?”

“If we follow,” said Albert, “it might put us in the center of this thing.”

“I think we shouldn’t follow, exactly because it might put us in the center of this thing,” said Arlene. They both had a good point. There was no questioning Albert’s courage; but Arlene and I had the experience.

I felt a disturbance in the Force behind me. Jill squeezed in, her face hard, cheeks streaked where she’d been crying. But she was in control, the mask tight.

“Let’s vote on it,” she suggested, demonstrating she’d picked up some vile, egalitarian habits from somewhere.

“Sure,” I said. “A show of hands for all those who think we should follow the imp through the teleporter.” Albert and Jill raised their hands. “Now, those against.” Arlene raised her hand. “If you vote with her, it’s a tie,” said Jill, proving she’d taken some courses in the Higher Arithmetic. “It’s not necessary for me to vote,” I said, “because Arlene’s vote counts as three. The nays carry.” “Oh!” exclaimed Jill, frustrated. Albert merely shrugged.

“Let’s put a guard on the grid,” I said. “The spiny could return with reinforcements: hell-princes, pumpkins—“ “Maybe even a steam-demon,” Arlene added. We could tell that the new monster fighters weren’t exactly following the conversation.

“There’s lots of different aliens,” said Arlene.

“I know that,” said Jill, a touch defensively. “I’ll take first watch,” said Albert. “If we’re not going to follow, I’d suggest we hide out in the trailer … but maybe that’s not such a good idea. Instead of teleporting, the—imp?—might drive up with a tank column. Are we waiting until night before we leave?” “On foot we’d wait,” I said, “but in this truck, the Bad Guys will probably just assume we’re members of the club. Who but a monster or zombie would be driving in this region now? Besides, Albert is right; we have to get out of here like now.”

“Assuming zombies can drive,” mumbled Arlene. “If they have brains enough to shoot, they have brains enough to drive,” I said.

“Can I drive the truck?” asked Jill, eyes wide. “It would really be cool.”

I’ve created a Frankenstein’s monster! I thought. “Can you drive a stick?” I asked. She nodded. “A big rig like this, double-clutching, multiple forward gears? Have you ever?”

“Well, not this big,” she admitted. “But I’m sure I can handle it.”

Normally, that wouldn’t be good enough. But this time, I wanted all three seasoned fighters in the back in case the imp came back with a beastie battalion. “Wait a minute,” I said. “Maybe we can take the truck and not be stuck with the damned teleporter.” I went back to it, crouched down and examined it thoroughly. It was literally melded to the steel floor; the only way to leave it would be to ditch the entire trailer. But we still had to get to a place of safety before we could stop long enough to unhitch cab from caboose.

“How about I go up front and look for the keys,” said Jill, growing happier by the second. She wasn’t about to let this opportunity slip by her. “I’m going with you,” I said, praying the monsters would not choose this moment to invade. There were no keys in the cab, but I found a set in one of those little magnetic holders outside, underneath the left front fender. This bothered me. If the monsters were using the truck, why would they hide the key? Or had they not even used this vehicle as a vehicle since they attached the teleporter? I didn’t know how long we’d use the cab—maybe only long enough to hop the next train, assuming we could warp back to the original plan. But in the field, no plan was any good that didn’t adjust instantly to reality. If the truck could get us a good piece of the way, we should go for it. If it caused more problems, then we could always switch back to playing hobo. Jill opened the glove compartment and found a map showing the most direct route to L.A.—good old I-10; the best truck stops were marked for convenience. The original driver had been most obliging. If we were lucky, some of these stations might be abandoned, with stocks of fuel waiting for us. I could do without demonic attendants offering free human sushi with every fill-up. I’d definitely

go with self-service, even if I had to shoot it out for the privilege. Jill started the engine and I gave her a lecture about reading gauges. As if I had any idea what I was doing! But you can't let kids think you don't know. This led right into a few more lectures about overheating the engine, dust storms, fatigue factors, and highway hypnosis.

At no point did Jill try to shoot me. Her self-control was exactly what you demand of a good Marine. "At least there won't be many cars for me to run into," she predicted. If I didn't know better, I'd think she wasn't trying to cheer me up.

"Go west, young lady," I said as a parting shot. "Find us somewhere safe to park and disconnect. I don't like hauling around this reinforcement roach coach."

"See you later," she answered.

I returned to the back and caught Arlene grinning like the Cheshire cat that just ate the bird store. Albert seemed amused by something as well.

"You were up there a long time," she said.

"Looking for the keys," I answered solemnly. "You took a long time getting back here since the engine started," said Albert.

I wouldn't let them get to me: "Giving her a few helpful tips, that's all. I'm sure she'll do fine." At that precise moment the truck lurched forward and stalled. Everything in the back shifted forward, except for the teleporter pad. The teleporter pad was just fine.

Arlene laughed. At no point did I try to shoot her; if Jill could hold it, so could I. I'm trained, a professional—a Marine.

Jill finally got the hang of shifting—I suppose she had had some training—and we were on our way. She proved herself a teenager by driving too fast; then she swerved suddenly, creating a new mystery to solve: what the hell was she avoiding?

Being thrown around inside gave me motion sickness; I hadn't felt this bad since the last time I was on a friend's boat and got seasick. But I wasn't complaining. Not me.

Besides, just about the time I would have risked Arlene's mirth, the spiny sent us a Christmas present. There was a brief moment of warning, the humming and the glow. We trained our weapons on the spot, allowing for a split second of identification. There was always the remote possibility of a human escaping from hell.

Then the thing materialized. It wasn't a recruit for humanity's army. And it wasn't a zombie, an imp, or any other old friend. The bastards had sent us a new monster.

There was something especially odd about the appearance. This sucker wore clothes! He had on red shorts and a white T-shirt. At a quick glance, it looked like a living skeleton in lederhosen. There wasn't time for a closer look—we already delayed firing a second too long. The idiotic wardrobe threw us off. The thing jumped at me, picked me up with one hand and threw me at the wall. I rolled with the impact and scrambled to my feet, still holding onto my twelve-gauge; but before I could fire, the monster had Arlene in one claw and Albert in the other. Thin as it was, we were like rag dolls in its hands. Jill was shouting through the partition, wondering what was wrong. I would have loved to tell her, but I was otherwise occupied, waiting for a clear shot. The skeleton flung Albert down, but kept hold of Arlene. The angle made Arlene a shield, so I started maneuvering around, trying to maintain my footing with Jill's increasingly panicked driving. As I tried for a better position, the damned bone pile turned and punched out Albert!

I mean, it hauled off and slugged him, and he went down for the count. The stupid red shorts suddenly seemed like boxing shorts. If the invaders were developing a sense of humor, I knew the true meaning of horror.

Adding to the fun, Jill started swerving left and right. Maybe she thought she was helping. She wasn't. I heard a horrible crunching sound, and I was thrown to the floor … but Red Skeleton remained planted as if it had grown roots. Jill must have run into a car—but from here, it was impossible to tell whether it had been parked or was tooling down the road with Satan himself at the wheel. At the moment, I didn't care about anything except dismantling that freaking skeleton.

Back on my feet, duck gun in hand, I shouted loud enough for Jill to hear: "Keep steady and keep going!" I was afraid that if she came to a sudden stop, it would be an advantage for Mr. Bones. I needed my opening. Then the dumb monster gave it to me. He put Arlene down so he could slug her. I let him place her out of the line of fire, and the minute she was down, I got in close to the thing and introduced its mouth to both barrels. The mouth opened just like a human one. I made sure it would never close again. I blew its head clean off.

This slowed it down. Unfortunately, decapitation was not the last word with this guy. He'd spent so much time throwing us around like preteen sparring partners, I hadn't even noticed the pair of rocket launchers strapped to its back—until now. In its death throes, Bones bent forward like a hinge and fired a rocket from each tube.

Its head was pointing toward the front… and that's where the rockets went.

The thing splintering into constituent bones, but Arlene was up from the floor in time to scream “Jill!” I was already out the trailer door and scuttling along the running board before the echo died away.

17

The rockets blew through the front of the trailer and the back of the cab, passing on either side of a white-faced Jill while she was driving. Either side. By some miracle worthy of every Holy Book ever written, both rockets missed her.

“Jesus and Mary!” I shouted. I slid through the hole where the cab wall used to be and sat down next to Jill. She was white as cotton, shaking like an AK on full-auto, gripping the wheel so hard I half expected her to leave indentations. First Rule of Talking to the Driver When the Driver is in Shock: “It missed you, Jill; you’re all right.”

She nodded very slowly, but didn’t speak. I tried another tack: “Wouldn’t you like a break from driving?” She nodded again. “Well, why don’t you pull over, uh, there,” I said, pointing to a tree-lined side street. There was nothing around here; we could pull the plug on the teleporter trailer. Jill pulled over. “Would you stay up here on watch while I return to the others?” I asked.

She finally spoke: “Yes. I will. Fly.” I patted her on the shoulder, glad she’d addressed me that way. I suspected she would be driving more conservatively after this. I decided not to ask her about the car. As Jill parked and sobbed, I crawled back into the trailer. “Our new convenient, modern cab,” I said, “lots of ventilation makes it easier than ever to move back and forth.”

My attempt at gallows humor fell on adder’s ears. “Fly,” said Arlene, voice shaking, “maybe we should acquire another vehicle.”

“Why?” I asked. She stared at me dumbfounded. “Let’s take a closer look at our new critter,” I continued.

On first contact it appeared to have no skin at all. But close examination showed a thin layer of almost transparent epidermis. Close up, it looked a man in the terminal stages of starvation.

“I’d hoped we wouldn’t see anything like this,” said Arlene.

Albert started to get the drift and asked: “You never saw one like this in space?”

“No,” I answered, “but we saw a place where they manufactured creatures on an assembly line.” “And living blocks of flesh,” said Arlene. “I’m certain it was human

flesh—experiments creating human flesh."

"The evils of science," said Albert.

I saw Arlene tense up, but this time it was my turn. "There's no putting that genie back in the bottle, my friend. We master everything the universe offers, or we're wiped out, another failed experiment. No happy medium or ignorant bliss."

He held up his gun. "Maybe you're right," he said.

"This weapon would be black magic to Joseph Smith. I should pick on the engineers instead of the scientists. Some scientists say that some things we can do, we must never do."

"Such as?" asked Arlene.

"Godless genetic manipulation," he answered.

"That's what we're fighting, isn't it?" "Scientists who talk that way are the worst traitors to the human race," said Arlene. "I don't really mind religious people being afraid of new discoveries," she said, "but scientists are supposed to know better. This enemy's greatest power is biology. They've turned it into a superweapon. If that means we have to learn to use it ourselves, then we have to … otherwise, we're disarmed."

"You'd turn us into monsters like that?" asked Albert, pointing at the dead one. "Or our children?" he added.

"No, of course not," she said. "But why should you object to genetically engineering angels?" "Because they already exist and will help us in the hour of need."

"Mexican standoff," I said. "This head-cutting is officially declared a tie. Now, shall we return to the matter at hand?"

"Well, Fly," purred Arlene, "whose turn is it to name this sucker?"

"I'm sure it's yours," I lied.

She must have already decided, because right away she said, "That's easy; a bony."

"Brilliant," I said. "Don't you think so?" I asked Albert.

"I guess," he said. "I guess we should be able to tell them apart."

“Albert, would you mind checking on Jill?” I asked. He was happy to get out of there. As Arlene and I started decoupling the trailer, I whispered in her ear, “So what do you think?”

“I think they’re getting closer to copying our real, human form. Even the stupid clothes are a dangerous advance. A goal of the aliens is probably to create false humans; if they succeed, they can infiltrate the areas not under alien control … like Salt Lake City.” “We can expect better frauds as time passes,” I said. “Now let’s get to the next town along the railroad line, hop a train, and continue to L.A.”

Albert and Jill were glad to hear the new plan. While Arlene and I were busy worrying each other, Albert had helped calm Jill down to the point where she insisted on doing whatever driving remained. Fortunately, it was a sleeper cab for partnered driving; we squeezed in, Arlene and Albert in the back, me up front with Jill, and set off down the road. We passed a score of alien patrols, but the truck must have had the mark of the beast on the grill, for none of them threw us a second glance.

The next town along the line was Buckeye. We ditched the truck cab, then waited for night. We found an alley and enjoyed the busy sounds of night life in this modern world: troop trucks every few minutes, the tramping of little zombie feet, screams of pain, howled orders from hell-princes, and the occasional earthshaking tread of steam-demons. Even more soothing to our shattered nerves were mechanical sounds that reminded me of the spidermind, evidently a smaller model. I wondered if this one got better mileage.

“Have you noticed an odd thing?” whispered Arlene.

“You mean besides everything?” I replied. “The aliens generally seem to know when humans are around,” she said.

I hadn’t thought about it before, but the facts supported her. “How?”

“Remember that lemony smell of theirs, right?” she continued her line of argument. “What if we smell as bad to them? They might detect us by the odor we give off.”

“Maybe they deliberately give the reworked zombies that odor so they can tell them apart from living humans?”

“You know, A.S., if the aliens start manufacturing infiltrators, they sure as hell can’t smell like zombies. That would be a dead giveaway.” My heart bled for the technical difficulties faced by the alien imagineers. The importance of having Arlene and Yours Truly on this mission was the background we brought with us. Remembering how we

had turned the monsters against each other upstairs, I figured we could try it again when the time came. In fact, it should be even easier to turn the monsters against the new infiltrators: they wouldn't smell wrong enough. Meanwhile, there was the little matter of our immediate survival and carrying on to L.A.… and that meant hopping a freight as soon as possible. "I have another plan," I told my loyal troops. I hoped it would sound as good to me as I was about to make it sound to them.

We waited for another truck to go by before settling down to the conference. It was easy to size up the strengths and weaknesses of our little foursome. Jill was brainy but callow; Albert was forthright, strong, reliable, stalwart, and no dummy. But he had yet to show the special kind of intelligence and instincts needed for command (another reason for the President of the Twelve not to press about who would command this mission). Arlene was cynical and sophisticated, the best woman soldier I'd ever known. But at some deep level she lacked a certain badness that was so much a part of Yours Truly that I didn't have to think about it.

The reason for me to be in charge was that I wouldn't hesitate to sacrifice all our lives if I thought it would make a difference in winning a crucial battle in this war. Arlene could make the same decision, but she'd hesitate where I wouldn't. In a strange way, I was the safest of the adults to befriend the teenager because no friendship or emotional ties would cloud my military judgment. With all that Arlene and I had faced up to this point, I counted myself fortunate that we had survived. I was also glad that I hadn't needed to be a perfect bastard. Yet.

The truck passed, and they waited to hear the plan. "You all know that we must infiltrate the train station and stow away on an outgoing train. The risk will increase once we do this. Let me point out that until we reach the enemy computers, Jill is the only one not expendable. After she retrieves the data, everyone is expendable, so long as one of us survives to get it through to the War Technology Center. Get it out to Hawaii; they'll find you."

"Yes," said Arlene calmly. Albert nodded. Jill stared wide-eyed as my words registered. I continued: "I noticed a number of abandoned grocery stores as we were working our way in. I don't know if zombies still eat human food, but I doubt it. And I'm certain the monsters don't."

"Maybe the aliens can't digest what we eat," said Albert.

"Well," mused Arlene, "they can eat us; and we are what we eat." She was being her usual, grisly self; but I was the only one who smiled.

“Whatever,” I said. “So here’s the plan. Albert, you buzz to one of these stores and collect all the rotting lemons you can.”

“I get it,” he said. “That’ll smell like those zombies we gunned down …”

“Like all zombies,” said Arlene.

“… and confuse their sniffers,” he finished his thought. “Arlene—would you come with me?” He paused, as if surprised at what he’d said. He looked at me, remembering our informal chain of command. “Is it all right if she comes with me?” he asked. “I mean, if it’s okay with her.” He stared at her a little sheepishly.

“I was going to assign you one of us,” I said. “So long as there are four of us, it’s crazy for one to go off alone. We’ll always pair off when we have to separate.”

“I’d like to go with Albert, then,” said Arlene in an even tone of voice, betraying nothing.

“Fine,” I said. “Jill and I will wait here until you return. We’ll assume you’ve run into trouble if you’re not back by, hm, 2200.” Among items I was grateful for, we still had functional watches. Who gave a damn what day of the week or month it was any longer? The importance of a wristwatch was to coordinate activity.

Jill and I watched as A&A checked their weapons and moved out. They ran across the open space, Arlene first, Albert bringing up the rear, and then I could breathe again.

“When do we move out?” asked Jill.

“In a moment. We’re still safe here.”

The word “safe” triggered something in her. “I hadn’t thought about it until what you said, but I don’t like being more …”

“Critical to the mission.”

“Uh-huh. Critical. It feels weird.”

“Don’t worry,” I said. “After you’ve done your hacker bit, you have permission to die with the rest of us.” I tried for a light tone of voice but the words sounded wrong.

“I’m not afraid to die,” she said.

“I know you’re not. You did great in the truck, the way you kept driving. I’m proud of you.” Her whole body relaxed when I told her that.

I figured she could handle some more of my deep thoughts. Arlene and I had been through so much together that there were things I could say easier to the new recruit: “Cowardice is usually not the problem in war, Jill. Most people have more guts than they realize. Most can be trained to do all right.” “What’s the problem, then?” she asked through slitted eyes.

I looked up and down the alley. We were still alone, and it was a pleasure to hear the sounds of demonic industry muffled and distant. The danger was at arm’s length, a good place to keep it as long as possible. “In a way, we’re lucky to be fighting monsters.”

“Lucky?” she half shouted.

“Keep your voice down!”

“Sorry.”

“Fighting monsters makes it easy. Up to now, all the wars on Earth have been between human beings. That’s much harder.”

Her face scrunched up as she pondered what I said.

It was like watching thoughts march across her face. “I could never hate human beings the way I hate the demons,” she said.

“You’re lucky to feel that way,” I said. “How does fighting monsters make it easier?” she threw at me. “They’re harder to kill than people.” “We don’t take any prisoners,” I said. “We don’t have to worry about any of that. And if we did take one, we don’t have to decide whether we should torture him. Hell, we don’t even know if they have a nervous system like ours.”

“Torture?” she asked, wide-eyed again. Then she thought about it. “I could torture them.” “To get information?” I asked.

“To pay them back for what they’ve done.” “Could you torture humans if they’d done the same things?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “What kind of torture?” Looking at her, I remembered an officer who briefly passed through Parris Island as my class officer before moving on to Intelligence, maybe even the CIA (who knows?).

He took a whole slate of medical courses, though he had no interest in being a doctor. He had a weak, limp handshake. He probably couldn't fight his way out of a revolving door. He scared the living crap out of me. I figured I'd given a fourteen-year-old enough to chew on for one day.

"Any kind." I didn't elaborate.

"I think I could torture any humans who join the aliens," she said.

"Then you're home free," I said. "I don't think the enemy is doing any recruiting except for zombies." She brightened. "And we know what to do with them, don't we, Fly?"

"We sure do." I tried out one of my playful punches on the kid's arm, like I did with Arlene. She pulled away at first, then sort of apologetically punched back. She gave off all the signs of having been abused once. By human beings, probably. Human beings always confuse the issue.

Now it was time for us to hurry up and wait.

18

I kind of felt bad leaving Fly and the kid to go traipsing off with this geek.

The first time I saw Albert, I thought he was a trog. Maybe it was the way he held his weapon against the head of the only other man in my life besides Wilhelm Dodd who's ever been really worth a damn: Flynn Taggart, corporal, United States Monkey Corps. As I joined this Mormon beefcake on the grocery store expedition, I found myself sneaking glances at his profile, and finding strength where I'd first suspected weakness.

I've always loved strong men. That's how I remember my father. He died when I was only ten, so I may not remember him with complete objectivity. But that's the way I want to think of him. I grew up defending his memory against my brother, who acted like a snot and said Dad deserted us.

I hadn't thought about my family since the invasion began, except when Fly got me going on my brother and the Mormon Church. I'd be happy to keep it out of my mind and off my tongue, except that Albert asked me: "You don't like Mormons much, do you?" We were in an alley outside a likely grocery store, taking a breather. Zombies were unloading bread from a bread truck, an eighteen wheeler. Bet the boxes didn't contain bread; and I wasn't sure I wanted to know what was really in them.

"I have a problem with all institutional churches," I said. "It's nothing personal." Of course, it was personal and I'm not a very good liar.

"If you don't want to talk about it, I'll understand," said Albert diplomatically. The big dork had some smarts.

Maybe I should talk to him. Fly and I were so close that we couldn't verbalize everything there was between us. He had a little-boy quality that was attractive in a friend but definitely not what I wanted in a lover. Maybe it was part of the Mormon conditioning, but Albert projected father qualities.

The one time I let myself be talked into therapy, back in college when my family was exploding, I dropped hundreds of dollars to be told what I already knew. My ideal male friend would be the brother I never had. Fly was just what the doctor ordered. My ideal lover was Daddy. The therapist was a Freudian so he didn't have much imagination.

The women's group I hung out with for one summer had a lot more imagination. It wasn't my fault that the experiences of my youth fit the Freudian pattern better than they did the theories of the sisterhood. It just came down that way.

So I saw the concern in Albert's face, a guy who wanted to be a pillar of strength to some All-American Gal, and it was hard not to cut him some slack. Here we were, huddled down together in a dark, smelly alley, ready to save the human race from all the denizens of hell, and poor old Albert was concerned about how I felt about his religion.

A more elemental kind of man would just be trying to put the make on me, arguing that the human race is near extinction and let's make love while we can and think about the future instead of the self, babe. Not Albert. Not Fly. In completely different ways, both these men were gentlemen. And Jill was a fine young lady. I could have done a lot worse in choosing companions for Armageddon.

"Albert, I won't lie to you again. I do have a hang-up about the Mormon Church; but it won't affect us. I respect you, um, in spite of it."

His voice was polite, if a little frosty: "Thank you. I won't pressure you about it."

Well, if I could tell Fly some of it, I didn't see why I couldn't talk to the big Mormon. Again the thought came to me that I could get more off my chest with this relative stranger. As close as I was to Fly, my platoon pal, there was a reticence with him I could never shake.

If I said to Fly that "there are some things you wouldn't understand," he'd stare at me with his what the hell are you talking about expression and make me feel like a silly, emotional girl; he wouldn't do it deliberately, but the result would be the same. The truth was there were certain things I didn't want to share with Fly. The reasons were emotional; and those were never good enough reasons for him. "Albert," I said, feeling the shape of his name as I spoke it for the first time from a quiet place inside, "I want to tell you about my brother."

"I'll listen; but you don't have to if you don't—" "He was never really what you'd call a real man; I mean, I don't think he would have made a good Marine. Had the bad luck to be really pretty … not like a guy; I mean a girly-man kind of pretty. You know, delicate features, pale skin, long, beautiful lashes like a girl."

"Big guy?"

"Yeah, right. When I was twenty, I outweighed him by ten pounds—I mean, five kilograms … gotta be military here."

“Ow. That can be rough.”

“It got worse. A lot of the older guys in the theater—he did stage-crew stuff for the Spacelings—they kind of came on to him. Real aggressive, gay stuff; sometimes the theater can get like that, and anybody who says it can’t never did theater in L.A. or New York. I don’t even know if they were serious, or of they just wanted to freak him; but Buddy—“ “Buddy?”

“Heh, blame him for that. He was named Ambrose, so he called himself Buddy. Buddy got real scared that he was, you know, gay. It wouldn’t have mattered if he were; he would’ve said, ‘Hey, like, that’s it,’ you know? But he wasn’t. He wasn’t really anything; so he totally bugged.”

“I don’t know what to say. I’ve never had that problem. I’ve always known I was a flaming heterosexual.”

“So he kept always trying to prove his manhood … you know, shoving little girls around, sticking his zinger in any doughnut hole he could find. He even once …” I hesitated.

“With you?” asked Albert, suddenly too perspicacious for words. Damn it.

“It was pathetic; really negative zone. I took him down so fast he cracked the sound barrier between vertical and horizontal. And it wasn’t too long after that he fell in with a bad crowd and suddenly decided he would convert to Mormonism.”

“What were you before that?”

“What do you expect? ‘Sanders,’ Episcopalian, as close to the Church of England as you can get in the U.S.”

“How long did he stay with us?”

“Eight months; he moved to SLC, moved back to Hollywood half a year later. I think he showed up at the Overland church a couple times, then found a new savior: a drug called tank. Ever hear about it?” “Nope. ‘Fraid I’m not up on the drug culture … not from the using perspective. Your brother’s problems are his own making,” said Albert. “Would you fee! the same way about the Catholics or Lutherans or Baptists, if he used them as a rest stop on the road to hell?”

That made me smile. “Albert, I had no idea you were so eloquent! I admit I’m prejudiced; when I’m thinking about it, I’m pissed at all organized religion; but only the

Mormons cut into my guts like that. I think church enables aberrant behavior." Albert laughed, and I had to admit I sounded pompous. "Temples too?" he asked.

"Oh, right," I said. This man had debated at some point in his life. "All religion, especially the ones that pretend not to be. They all say theirs is a way of life or an ethical system or a personal relationship with God—it's only the other guy who has a religion." "Arlene, I'd like to ask a favor of you. Please don't tell Fly about our talk. I like things the way they are right now between all of us. I don't want to do anything to distract Taggart from doing the fine job he's doing."

"I keep confidences. You listened to my story, that's all."

He shifted his bulk against the wall so he could sit more comfortably. "You mentioned your brother getting involved with drugs. So did I, from the other side. I don't like to talk about being a Marine sniper; it's a private thing between me and the Lord. But one week, I was assigned to kill a woman who was suspected of being the primary money launderer for the Abiera drug cartel in Colombia."

"No great loss," I said, far too quickly. He moved closer, as if he thought the monsters might overhear and report his confessions to Satan Central. "Arlene, I said she was suspected, not proven."

"Oh," was all I could think to say. I said it with sincerity.

"I'd never killed a woman before. They call it termination, but it's killing. I don't make it easier by playing with words."

"There goes your career in the military," I said, liking him better all the time. "So you were to terminate this woman with extreme prejudice because she was a suspect."

He nodded, unable to speak for a moment. "Strong suspect. But I had a lot of problems with it. It went against my moral learning."

I was having an attack of sarcasm and couldn't keep it bottled up. I hit him with: "Killing all the suspects in the hope you get the target? The Church of Central Intelligence makes that a sacrament."

"No, I mean killing a woman. In the end I decided if I couldn't justify killing her, then how could I justify killing a guy who was supposed to be a renegade colonel from Stasi? I did him the month before."

"Now who's playing with words?"

“Killed him the month before. He was training Shining Path terrorists to be sent over to Kefiristan to help the Scythe. It came down to one thing: either I trusted my superiors knew what they were doing, or I didn’t.”

He wanted to be frank with me, but the words choked in his throat. I helped him along. “You killed her,” I said.

“I killed her, yes. I still think she was guilty.” Suddenly, I chuckled. He looked at me as if I’d completely lost my mind. “No, no, Albert, it’s not what you think. I’m laughing about all the trouble America went to trying to protect fuck-ups like my brother.”

My use of the past tense brought both of us back to the immediate nightmare. “I think we’re all sinners,” he concluded. “We all deserve to die and be damned; we earned that fate when we disobeyed the Lord. Which is why we need the Savior. I take responsibility for the blood on my hands, even if I let Him wash it clean. I don’t blame the Church, the Marines, my parents, society, or anyone or anything else.” “We have a difference there, my friend,” I told him.

“I blame God.”

“Then you blame the nature of things.”

“Yeah, I guess I do. ‘The nature of things’ is waiting for us beyond this alley with claws and horns, lightning and brimstone. My only regret is that I won’t meet God when I have a rocket launcher.” I knew I was getting worked up and discussing religion; but I was talking to a human being, not the President of the Twelve.

And really, Arlene Sanders, are you sure you’re not trying to wash away the blood on your hands, the blood of a whole compound of innocents who might die because of your stupid mistake, sending a radio message to co-opted Colonel Karapetian? I shuddered and shut off the thought.

“You can’t blow up God, Arlene,” he said in an annoyingly tolerant tone of voice. I expected my blasphemy would get more fire out of him.

I tried one last time, while I still had my mad on:

“He made Himself flesh once, didn’t He? If He’d do it again …”

“I think you’d find the cross a heavier weapon to carry than a bazooka, Arlene. Somehow I don’t see you nailing anyone to a cross.”

I almost told him about the row of crucified hell-princes the pumpkins had used to adorn Deimos and how I'd happily do the same; then I made myself shut up instead. I'd said enough. More than enough. The quiet, easy way he was dealing with my outburst told me that Albert was a man of faith so strong I couldn't crack it with a BFG. Besides, I had the feeling he would start praying for me if I didn't cool it. "Thank you for telling me about Colombia," I said.

"There's no one I'd rather talk to than you, Arlene.

Now let's get back to work."

Damn if I wasn't becoming attracted to honest Albert. For the first time in weeks, I thought about Dodd, my—my guy, who was zombified; my lover whose body I put out of its misery.

A small glimmer of guilt tried to build up into a fire, but I doused it with anger. We all had our problems. We were all human. I was sick and tired of thinking about all the things I did wrong or could have done better. Humanity was not a weakness; it was a strength, and our job was to win back our world, and damn it, why did I hesitate to think "lover" when I thought about Willie? Was it because it had the word "love" in it?

Darling Dan's Supermarket was the next battlefield. The zombies finished unloading the crates of whatever and drove off in the bread truck. Now the coast was clear.

"Come on," I said.

"Right behind you," he said.

19

We slipped into the supermarket through the back delivery door and worked our way toward the front. Lights were flickering on and off with the same irritating strobe effect that Fly and I had to deal with on Deimos so friggin' often. Maybe these guys weren't sloppy, slovenly, indifferent creeps; maybe it was some kind of aesthetic statement. All I knew was flickering light gave me a headache and made me want to unload a clip at the first refugee from Halloween who happened across my path.

"Come on," said Albert, a few steps ahead of me now.

I loved symmetry as much as the next guy. "Right behind you," I quoted. It was the next best thing to dancing with him.

Inside the main part of the store, the fluorescent lights were on and burning steady. But the refrigeration was off, and there was a rotten smell of all kinds of produce, milk, and meat that had been let go before its time.

"Ew," said my Mormon buddy, and he hit the center of the bull's-eye. The meat smelled a lot worse than the bad vegetable matter. And oh, that fish! If I hadn't been wide awake on adrenaline—compared to which caffeine is harmless kid stuff—I would never have believed what I saw next. Nothing on Phobos or Deimos had the feeling of a fever dream compared to the spectacle of…

"Hell in the aisles," breathed Albert.

The grocery store was as busy as a Saturday afternoon in the good old world. Mom and Dad and the kids were there. Young lovers wandered the aisles. Middle-class guys with middle-sized guts in ugly T-shirts pushed shopping carts down the center aisle with no regard for who got in the way. Nothing had changed from the way it used to be … except that everyone was dead.

Zombies on a shopping spree. Eyes never to blink again. Mouths never to form words, but to drool foul-smelling, viscous liquid worse than anything in an old wino's stomach. Hands reaching out to grab anything or anyone that fell in their path.

The sour lemon odor was so concentrated that I had trouble breathing and Albert's eyes were watering; my throat was filling with something unpleasant. The nearest zombie to us had been a big man once, a football player would have been my guess. Thick blue

lines stretched across his face; I couldn't tell if they were veins or grooves or painted on. Next to him stumbled the remains of a cheerleader whose long hair she'd probably taken good care of a long time ago in the world lost way, way back … in the previous month. The zombie girl's hair looked like spiders had tangled themselves up in their own webs and died on her head.

These two were the best-looking zombie couple. The nearest family was disgusting; especially the thirteen-year-old boy (what had been a thirteen-year-old boy). Part of his head was missing. It looked melted, as if a big wad of caramel had been left out in the sun and gone bad on one side.

A thin, bald man looked like a scarecrow with a laughing skull on top. His right cheek was missing and the few teeth that hadn't fallen out on that side made me think of kernels of uneaten corn or keys on an unpolished piano.

Two zombie Girl Scouts carried filthy boxes in their pale hands. One dropped a box and several fingers spilled out. A man dressed as an undertaker fell to his knees and shoveled the fingers into his mouth where they stuck out like pale worms. A dead priest groped at the attache case of a dead account executive over a pile of fish left to rot on the floor. The zombie odor was so pronounced that I could barely smell the week-old fish.

"Are you all right?" asked Albert. I nodded but didn't look at him. "You're staring at them." Albert's words were like an echo from Fly. My old buddy always gave good advice, like not focusing on any details that wouldn't help the mission. But this was the first time I'd seen so many of these human caricatures this close when I wasn't engaged in taking them apart.

"I'm okay," I whispered, pulling Albert back in the shadows. "We're doing fine. The stink in here is so bad they couldn't smell out live humans to save their—" "Lives," he finished my inappropriate image. "Let's get the lemons and get out of here." There's never any arguing with good sense. But as we took another look-see, the zombie density inside the store was worse than a minute ago. "Where the hell are they all coming from?" I asked. "Probably," Albert agreed.

The scene was becoming even more surreal. Zombies pushing baskets up and down the aisles, grabbing cans and boxes of junk food (which would take a lot more than the end of the world to go bad). Some of the zombies were engaged in what seemed to be purposeful activity, moving items from one shelf to another and then back again.

They didn't eat any of the groceries. They seemed caught up in the behavior of the past, as if the program had been so hard-wired into their skulls that not even losing their

souls could erase the ritual of going to the grocery store.

And then suddenly the lights went out. Whatever had kept the generator going was defunct. “What do we do now?” asked Albert.

“Take advantage of the situation,” I said. “This is fortuitous. We should have put the generator out ourselves. We can pass easier for zombies if they don’t see us. They’re too stupid to do anything about the dark.”

If there is ever a Famous Last Words Award, I’m sure that I’ll receive sufficient votes to make the final ballot. No sooner had I made my confident assessment than flickering, yellow light filled the store. Dozens of candles were lit. I could imagine Fly saying, in his I-told-you-so tone of voice, “If they can still shoot their weapons, they can do a lot of other things.”

It was bad enough when Fly was right so often in person. Now I was carrying him around in my head to tell me when I made a mistake!

Not everything the zombies lit was a normal candle. Some gave off a heavy smell of burning butter or fat. I didn’t want to think about some of the items they might be using for torches.

“I wonder how long before they burn the store down,” said Albert.

“They haven’t yet,” I said. “Let’s get those lemons and get the hell out of here!” As we went out into the throng, my heart was pounding so hard that I worried some of the creatures would hear it. Then they wouldn’t need to smell us out or see our TV-commercial-smooth complexions to turn us into today’s lunch special.

Matches still flared as zombies looked for items to light up. A “Price-Buster” banner suddenly caught fire and went up in flames. It didn’t set anything else on fire. For the first and probably last time in my life, I was grateful to be among zombies at that moment. Real, live human beings would have freaked and caused a panic more dangerous than a fire. The zombies didn’t care. And of course they didn’t bat an eye.

To be fair to Fly, he never overestimated zombies; he just didn’t want me underestimating them. For what Albert and I had to do now, we had to count on zombie stupidity. I made my way over to a pile of hand baskets and took one. Albert stuck behind me a lot closer than Peter Pan’s shadow.

I passed him the basket and noticed that his hands were shaking. I sure didn’t blame him. In fact, I had the strong feeling that he’d be doing a lot better in full combat against

the monsters. With his religious background, bodies of the reanimated dead had to be heavy stuff.

If I remembered correctly, and I always do, the Mormons had a more old-fashioned idea of the body. One thing I could give Fly's nuns—the Catholic Church didn't make you worry about what happened to your body in a war zone if your soul was in good shape. The more spiritual the faith, the more popular I figured it would be in the atomic age, where we can all be zapped out of existence in the pulse of a nucleus.

20

Albert's fear sort of made me more daring. After I got my award for Famous Last Words, I'd use it to join Psychos 'R' Us. This situation was so insane that I started to think it might work.

We turned a corner and saw a zombie-woman sitting on the ground. She had two candles, a bag of charcoal, and a cigarette lighter; four items, two hands. She couldn't decide which two items to hold. So she kept picking up two of them, dropping them, and picking up another random pair.

I looked over at Albert and tried a little telepathy. As usual, the results were nothing to worry the neighborhood skeptics. Since Albert wasn't picking up on my silent message, I stepped forward and waited for my opportunity. The next time the zombie-girl dropped her candle and lighter, I simply reached down and picked them up.

Now that I'd solved the zombie's quandary, she got up and stumbled vaguely down the aisle with the other candle and the charcoal. I started to pass the lighter to Albert, then changed my mind and gave him the candle, which I lit. I preferred keeping the thing that actually made fire.

Playing somewhere in the back of my head were all those old horror movies where the one thing monsters fear is fire. When I was a kid, sneaking those movies late at night when everyone else was asleep, I never thought I was boning up on documentaries. At least I hadn't used a hammer and stake yet in fighting these bastards; but I intended to keep my options open. We staggered down the aisle, trying to look suitably undead, and headed for the produce section. We quickly grabbed plastic bags and filled them with the most disgusting remains of lemons and limes we could find.

The limes weren't even a little green any longer; they were dull gray with black splotches. Although the lemons were still yellowish in spots, the other colors were dark and unwholesome. They were the sort of colors I preferred ignoring.

Other zombies began gathering around us and just standing there. Maybe our purposeful actions were too purposeful. Did these idiots have the brains to recognize nonzombie behavior?

I tried to think and look stupid, but that wasn't what was required. Pretending to be mindless is much more difficult. I let my mouth hang open and tried to work up a good

supply of drool. Albert picked up on the idea … the fact I found him immediately convincing shouldn't be taken as a put-down. But, man, did he look the part when he put on his goggle-eyed stare.

The act seemed to help a little. Some of the zombies left us alone and found other things to stare at. One large black man—what had been a black man—dressed as a high school coach, continued to block our way, staring at the basket of rotting produce instead of us. He started to get on my nerves. When I moved either to the right or left, he shifted slightly … just enough to suggest he was willing to block us if we wanted to move up the aisle.

We might very well want to move up the aisle because the crowd was starting to press in behind us, cutting off that avenue of escape. I couldn't remember if we had closed the door behind us when we sneaked in the back. Other zombies could be coming in that way, dead feet shuffling forward, guided by dead brains to regain a fragment of the living past. A sound came out of nowhere. It was so strange that I didn't even associate it with the walking corpses hemming us in. It was sort of a low mewling sound, coming deep from within chests where no heart beat. A humming, rasping, empty, lost, mournful, aching sound … a chorus of the damned calling out to any living humans left in the world, as if to say:

Come join us; life's not so good! Come and be with us. We are lonely for company. You can still be yourselves. The habits of a lifetime do not disappear only because life has spilled out. If you loaded a weapon in life, you can still do it in death; the routine will survive; all that will be burned away is the constant worry to prove yourself, make distinctions, show pride. Judge not; there is no point when you're dead. I wanted to scream. I wanted to take my 10mm and start firing, and keep firing until I'd wiped them all from the surface of the Earth. Aboveground was for the living! The dead belonged underground, feeding the worms, who still had a function to perform. The zombies were the pure mob, devoid of intelligence and personality. Staring at them in their own flickering candlelight, trying to pass, reminded me how much I hated Linus Van Pelt, who said he loved mankind, it was people he couldn't stand. Earlier, I read a book by H. L. Mencken, who said he had no love for the human race as a whole, but only for individuals.

Individuals. The whole point of evolution. Individuals. The only justification for the American revolution, for capitalism, for love. There were only two individuals in this cemetery that used to be a grocery store, and I was one. The other gestured at me that the basket of rotten citrus was full and we should be leaving, if we could find a path through the wall of pale, stinking, shambling flesh.

Albert took the lead. He picked up one of the limes and threw it up the aisle. It was a long shot, but it paid off when an ancient memory reached out fingers like a groping zombie and touched something in the coach's brain. He turned and shambled after the lime like it was a thrown ball.

We followed in the wake left by the big zombie pushing through the crowd. By the time the coach reached the lime, he had forgotten about us, which is saying it stronger than I intend. We were merely a series of impressions, of light and sound distracting the zombie for a brief moment.

The front door beckoned. It was standing wide open, so we didn't have to worry about the power. A fire was burning somewhere down the street, marking the path we would take if we made it outside. Our last obstacle was the long line at the checkout, believe it or not. A zombie-woman stood at the cash register, responding to old job conditioning as the others had fallen into the role of shoppers. She stood behind the counter, banging on the keys of the register with a clenched fist. The sight was too much, too friggin' bizarre even after all that we had seen. I laughed. It wasn't very loud, and I managed to choke it off at about the half-chuckle point. But it drew attention.

Maybe the shred of a brain that still functioned inside the ex-cashier's head was back from its coffee break, but she stopped banging the keys and looked at me. Then she opened her mouth, disgorging a cockroach that had been making its home there. A gap in her neck revealed the probable entrance to the bug condo.

Then the bitch made a sound. It was a brand-new sound, a kind of high wailing that drew the attention of the others. She was doing a call to arms, and the wandering eyes, listless bodies, jerking limbs, and empty heads responded.

They finally noticed us.

"Run!" I shouted, and I didn't have to tell Albert twice. There weren't very many between us and the door. Albert used his bulk to good advantage, and while he cleared the path I readied the AB-10. I waited until we were through the door before spinning around to take care of business. Sure enough, some of the zombies of higher caliber followed us through the door. I expressed my admiration for their brain power by answering with my machine pistol.

It felt good to be killing them again. Most of the zombies in the grocery store didn't have weapons, but the ones who followed us outside were armed. I always thought there was a link between intelligence and defending yourself; apparently it even applied at this almost animalistic level. The zombies returned fire.

Albert saw I was in trouble and ran back to me, Uzi ready. “Keep running, it’s all right!” I shouted as he took down a pair of Mom and Dads who took turns unloading the family shotgun in our direction. As they collapsed in a heap, other zombies I had shot got back up, fumbling with their weapons. Before they could get off another round, zombies coming up behind them fired, and the bullets tore into the front line of zombies. We booked.

The “Fly” tactic worked its magic; the front rank spun to return fire against their clumsy compadres. By the time we got behind a row of munched cars “parked” by the curb, the zombie melee was in full cry.

A bunch of spinys appeared from somewhere and had their hands, or claws, full trying to stop the melee. “Good job,” I said in Albert’s ear.

“The Lord’s work,” he said, smiling. “I didn’t know they were such a contentious lot.” He quoted a line, I don’t know if from the regular Bible or the Book of Mormon: “Satan stirreth them up continually to anger one with another.”

“You said it, brother.”

We had to get back to Fly and Jill; they’d be able to hear the ruckus and would wonder what hornet’s nest we’d stirred up. And it was nearly 2200. I thought about Albert as we made time. There was a lot more to this beefy Mormon than I’d first expected. Fly and I had done all right when he joined our team, or we joined his. I’d bet on all of us, even Jill.

The reasoning part of my brain ran the odds and concluded that we were screwed. It had done the same on Deimos where Fly and I had beaten the odds so often as to give a bookie a nervous breakdown. That was with just two top-of-the-line human beings against boxes of monsters. Now with four of us, we had the boxes of monsters badly out-numbered.

Albert and I entered the alley that felt like home after the grocery store. One advantage of fighting monsters was not having to worry about identification and who-goes-there games. There was a certain gait to a running human that the zombies lacked. They forgot a lot about being human.

Fly sighed and shook his head, somehow managing to say “I can’t take you anywhere!” and “welcome back” simultaneously without speaking a word. We were together again.

21

Damn, I was glad to see Arlene again. After all we'd been through together, survival was getting to be a habit. If reality took her away from me in blood and fire, I wouldn't mourn until I'd finished avenging her on the entire race of alien monsters. If by some miracle I was still alive when it was over and she wasn't, I would mourn for the rest of my life. Maybe she felt the same, but I couldn't afford to think about that.

As Albert dropped the grocery basket of rotting lemons right in front of Jill—who made one of her patented "ick" sounds—he tossed a quick glance back at Arlene, and it seemed to Yours Truly that the aforesaid returned it with interest. Compound interest. Well, stranger things had happened, especially lately. But I would never have imagined any chemistry between … well, it didn't bother me if something were cooking between them. All that mattered was the mission, I told myself.

"That caterwaul was you?"

"Like the good old days," said Arlene, "when we were young and carefree against a bloodred Mars filling up the sky."

"Huh?" said Jill.

"Uh," said Albert.

When Arlene waxed poetic, she was a happy camper. "Mission went well, did it?" I asked. "All right, let's apply the beauty treatment."

Albert bravely set the example, squashing several of the lemons and a lonely lime between his big hands then applying the result to his face. Arlene followed suit, and I, after taking a deep breath, dug in. There were plenty to go around. Then I noticed that Jill was hanging back.

"You're going to have to do this," I told her in my friendly voice.

"Yeah, yeah, I know," she said, only the second time she'd pulled the sullen bit around us. I could well imagine her giving this treatment to the President of the Twelve full-time. I wouldn't fault her for that. "It's not that bad," said Arlene, rubbing one down the side of her own leg. Staining camo wear was a nonproblem.

“Okay, okay,” Jill said, picking one up and tentatively applying it to her nose. “It’s gross,” she said with heartfelt sincerity.

“Here, let me help,” I said, becoming impatient. I took a lemon in each hand, squeezed, and then began rubbing the results in her hair.

“Hey!” she said, backing away.

“No time to be belle of the ball,” I snapped, continuing the operation on her face.

“Hey!” said Arlene, coming over, taking one of the lemons out of my hands and brandishing it under my nose as if it were a live grenade. “What do you think you’re doing?”

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“Doing my bit for truth, justice, and the American way.”

“Uh-huh,” said Arlene, reeking of a lack of conviction. “Fly Taggart, I need to explain this to you so that you will understand.” Smiling pleasantly, Arlene stomped on my right foot.

While I was digesting all the implications of her argument, she whispered in my ear, “She’s a woman, not a child.”

“Don’t treat me like a child!” Jill chimed in, as if she could hear.

“Don’t act like one.” I leaned close, ignoring Arlene, and spoke to Jill as I would to one of my squadron Marines who was acting out. “Listen up, ma’am. When you’ve got a set of butter bars, you can start thinking and making decisions. But until then, you do what I say, and I say this stuff is going on now. “We’ve done your hair and face; next step is the rest of your body. You want to do that yourself, or do you want to give me a thrill by having me do it?” She stared, then took the lime I held out. Test time was over for now.

We finished applying the lemons. Jill made faces but did fine; I hoped she wouldn’t stay pissed for the rest of the mission. Arlene lemoned the backs of the rest of us where we couldn’t reach, and then I did the same for her. After that, we bid farewell to our alley and moved out.

Albert took point and led us toward the railway station. I took the rear. Fortunately, now that we smelled like zombies, we could walk openly and carry our weapons. We rounded a corner and found ourselves in a mob of the previously mentioned. I could see

Arlene start to tense up—understandable after what she and Albert encountered at the grocery store. But a moment later she was putting on a good act, probably better than mine.

For a moment I worried about Jill's performance: arms straight out like a bad copy of Frankenstein's monster, legs too stiff and jerking as she walked … too exaggerated. She'd never make it on the legitimate stage. But the zombies didn't seem to notice. We passed through an archway and suddenly we were surrounded by imps, hell-princes, and bonys, with those damned rocket launchers strapped to their backs. I watched the bonys walk with a jerking motion so bad I could imagine strings pulling them as if they were the puppet skeletons I'd seen in Mexico during their "Day of the Dead" festival. If I hadn't already seen one in action in the truck, I'd think they were fake. One thing: they gave me new appreciation for Jill's performance as a zombie.

Then came that lousy moment when the Forces of Evil unveiled yet another brand new, straight-off-the-assembly-line monster. This one wasn't inadvertently funny in the manner of the bonys. This one was just plain disgusting.

The word fat barely described the awfulness of this sphere of flesh. We passed close enough to smell years of accumulated sweat, a neat trick considering how new the model had to be. The thing made me think of a planetoid trapped in Earth's gravitational field, only this hunk of flesh comprised fold upon fold of nauseating, ugly, yellow, dripping, flaccid chicken flab. Of course, that was only a first impression. As it came still closer, I decided that it was a lot worse than I first imagined.

All I could think of was a gigantic wad of phlegm carved by flabby hands into a semblance of the human form with two beady pig's eyes sunk deep into the grotesque face. At the end of each tree-trunk arm was a massive metal gun, starting at the elbow. In a choice between being blasted by those guns or touched in any way, there was no contest. I could imagine a lot of names for the thing, and I was sure Arlene would have some ideas; but I wanted Jill to have the honor of naming this one. She'd probably come up with a better name than the different terms for excrement unrolling in my mind.

There were plenty of other monsters and zombies through all this, more than enough to keep us all on our toes and plenty scared. But this thing was just too much for my stomach.

The two steam-demons looming up before us were more dangerous; but there was something almost beautiful about them in comparison. They were well-shaped, with good muscle tone showing on the parts of them that were flesh instead of machine. Even their metal parts seemed clean and shiny compared to the dingy, rusty-looking metal tubes sticking out of that fatboy. I knew I was in trouble when I started making aesthetic

judgments about the monsters. I didn't like the way the zombies hemmed us in. I pushed left and right, trying to lead my troops out, but always shying away from the vigilant hell-princes and bonys; they kept getting underfoot… whenever I'd try to ghost, there they were.

It took some moments for the penny to drop: we were being herded like cattle. By the time I realized it, it was too late to get out; the zombie mass funneled together, headed toward a large building. My heart went into overdrive, and I was already starting to calculate the odds of bolting, when Albert leaned close and rumbled into my ear, "Here's some luck—they're driving us into the train station." I looked, and by God if he wasn't right. They were putting us on a bloody train!

A man's heart deviseth his way: but the Lord directeth his steps.

The only possible fly in the ointment would be if the damned train were headed east; but I had a gut feeling it was headed straight into Los Angeles. We couldn't avoid the steam-demons; they were standing at the boarding ramp to the open cattle car that was already starting to fill. Well, we'd decided to take the first opportunity to get aboard, and this surely was some sort of sign.

Those old nuns of mine were receiving a lot of prayers from me lately. I could never imagine saints or angels; so when I got in one of these moods, those withered souls in black and gray habits played across my memory. I used to think the nuns that taught me were ugly old crones. With what I'd been seeing lately, they had taken on a new beauty in my mind's eye. My prayer was simple. Don't let fatboy get on with us, please; pretty please with a Hail Mary on it. It was easy to stay together; there wasn't any room to be separated. We were packed in like the Tokyo subway at rush hour. Of course, I realized that if we were separated, we'd have the devil's own time trying to get back together.

When all this was over, I thought I might give religion another shake; as the door to the cattle car closed, I saw that we weren't going to have to put up with fatboy: it got onto another car.

"It's open in the back!" said Jill in surprise. At first I made to silence her for fear we would attract attention, but there was so much noise going on around us that our words wouldn't be noticed over the roaring and growling filling the narrow space. We were being pushed toward the rear of the car, where instead of a solid wall, there was an arrangement of vertical wooden posts with horizontal metal slats running through them.

"That's some window," Arlene commented. "I see that none of you were brought up around livestock," I said caustically. "It's a cattle car." With a grinding sound, the train started forward with a great lurch, throwing us into our rearward neighbors, who

growled and pushed us back. The former humans who were now zombies did not behave nearly so well as humans would have; some responded to being jostled by firing off a few shots. “Great!” shouted Arlene.

“If this escalates, we’ll be wiped out in here!” I hollered back.

“What can we do about it?”

“Nothing!” I admitted. Time again to trust to luck. The nuns must have been working overtime, because the shots suddenly ceased. I glanced over and saw Albert with his eyes closed, moving his lips silently. I supposed that if praying was going to save us, this was a job for the pro.

Jill grabbed the back of my pants; it was a good idea—I grabbed Arlene, and she caught Albert. We traveled past several small towns that evidently held little of interest. The night sky had a weird glow, but I still preferred it to the return of day, if that sickening green sky was waiting for us. It was too dark to make out details, but occasionally we saw fires burning on the horizon, funeral pyres to mark the passing of humanity. We finally came to a violent stop and there was more jostling. Our luck was still with us; the gunshots did not resume.

“Damn, I wish we could see through the door,” I said. Behind us was a splendid view of a smashed building and a nice stretch of barren countryside; but heavy sounds in front of us indicated some action. “The designers must not care if the cows are well-informed,” said Arlene.

As if in answer to my request, the heavy wooden door in the side of the train was pushed open to unpack some zombies, and we were greeted by a sight you don’t see every day. A contingent of steam-demons was being herded by a spidermind. They were guarding what appeared to be a truck dolly in which a human form was wrapped up in bandages from head to toe. There was a slit for his eyes, but that didn’t help tell us anything about the man or woman propped up on the dolly; we could only assume this was a human because there were straps across the figure—a dead giveaway that he was a prisoner. The sight made me remember Bill Ritch. The only human they would take care to preserve with his mind intact was a human with knowledge they needed and couldn’t extract without destroying … which meant that here was someone else we should either rescue or kill. He couldn’t be left in the hands of the enemy, giving them whatever they needed. They marched forward out of sight, the steam-demons tramping in eerie, mechanical lockstep.

“Are you thinking what I’m thinking?” Arlene bellowed at me.

“Loud and clear!”

“They’ve got their tentacles on another of our tech lads!”

“Listen up!” I screamed. “Have plan!” They gave me their undivided attention, easy to do in such cramped quarters. “Grab guy! Run!”

Arlene rolled her eyes, unimpressed.

“How—move?” shouted Jill.

“Slowly!”

While we considered the strengths and weaknesses of our position, the monsters took the bandaged figure toward the front of the train. Although we couldn’t see very well, it was easy to figure out what happened next.

The train started up again, having received its important cargo.

“Forward!” I screamed. “Make path!”

Jill wriggled her hand slowly out to where she was able to extend her fingers and … the best way to describe it was that she goosed the zombie-woman in front of her. The nervous system of a zombie isn’t great shakes compared to when it was alive, but there were sufficient sparks left to kindle into fire. The zombie-woman didn’t jump or make any sort of exclamation; but she did move forward with sufficient force to dislodge the smaller male taking up space right in front of her.

Jill let Albert get in front of her. He had a lot of mass and widened Jill’s narrow opening. The objective was clear: push forward to the connection between the cars. With the speed of a snail we inched forward. I figured that so long as we didn’t piss off any of them enough to shoot at us, we were doing all right.

Just about then, one of the zombies took a potshot. I didn’t see any particular reason for it; but what was I doing, trying to apply reason to zombie behavior? The bullet struck another zombie in the throat, and it went down gurgling. We were packed so tightly, like Norwegian sardines, that further attempts at argument by projectile would probably annihilate the population of the cattle car.

Jill drew the small .38 caliber revolver we’d given her and looked scared and determined both at the same time.

“Hold your fire, Jill!” I shouted. She didn’t make me repeat it. The zombie with the itchy finger kept firing wildly and suddenly connected with a point where a metal slat and wooden post came together. A heavy zombie near to the point of impact fell back against the weakened spot and suddenly went right through, leaving a huge hole big enough for even Albert to fit through.

“New plan!” I bellowed.

22

By now the train was up to speed again, smoking along at 300, 320 kilometers per hour. At this speed, the wind could be considered a refreshing deluxe feature for the typical bovine passenger. As I attempted to squirm through the opening, I quickly learned that a typhoon-strength head wind could slow down the most dedicated Marine.

The main thing was not to drop my shotgun as I climbed on the sill, leaned out into the hurricane, and stretched up until I reached the railing along the outside top of the train. I hoped the zombies wouldn't pay any attention to this latest change in their environment. At some level they were still human enough to resent this ridiculous crowding, or they wouldn't be exchanging shots. Maybe our team would rate zombie gratitude for giving them elbow room.

While standing on the sill, leaning forward into the wind, holding the railing, I reached down to help Arlene. Her slim, dry hand slipped into my sweaty paw, and I noted that it was cold. Arlene always had trouble keeping her extremities warm. I hoisted her out and up to the roof, where she hooked her legs to hang on so she could lean back down. Then Arlene helped me take care of Jill.

I didn't blame Jill for being terrified. But I was surprised when she started shaking. Or maybe it was just the train rocking violently back and forth. I guess this would be an experience to write home about, if there were still a home. No matter how brave and grown-up this fourteen-year-old wanted to be, she was having one wild-ass situation after another thrown at her and had to handle each without benefit of training.

The terror in her eyes didn't prevent her doing what she had to do, and I didn't pay attention to the tears. The angle was bad, but Jill weighed almost nothing—and I heaved a sigh of relief as I finished handing her up to Arlene.

Albert was a problem. He was a big guy and not as gymnastically oriented as Yours Truly. Arlene and Jill attached webbing to the railing, then attached it to Arlene. The webbing is extraordinarily strong, able to hold tons before ripping. We didn't go into hell without taking some decent equipment! No way was Arlene going to fall with that stuff on her. Now Arlene and I could help Albert up. It was a lot easier than blowing away a steam-demon. We might even have enjoyed our time on the roof if not for the hurricane head wind. It smelled a whole lot better than inside.

We lay on our bellies, and a ferocious gale battered us. But we weren't blown off; in fact, we could stand shakily, leaning into the wind. I figured there must be some sort of air dam up front, otherwise, 300 kph would have swatted a standing man off the top of that train like finger-flicking a fly.

"Listen up!" I shouted against the gale. "Single-file!

Forward! Slowly! Don't fall!"

Arlene put her mouth right up to my ear. "How far L.A.?"

"Two hours—dawn—rescue human or kill him!" "What?" screamed Jill, clearly horrified. She was plenty loud enough to be heard. There was no need to explain to two old soldiers like Arlene and Albert. I'd stopped thinking of Jill as a young teen, but there was no getting around the fact that she was a civilian. "Death better than fate!" God only knew how much she heard, but she clenched her teeth and said nothing more. The brutal arithmetic inside my head could wait for another time; I hoped she would never have to decide who lives and who dies. Sometimes I envy civilians.

There was nothing else to say. Besides, we'd all be hoarse from shouting if we didn't shut up. I went first; it was my party. I set the pace nice and slow. It took nearly a quarter hour to crawl the length of the train; fortunately, the track through Arizona was pretty straight. But the natural swaying of the cars could still hurl any of us to certain death; the rails were laid for cargo, not passengers.

I looked back frequently; we didn't lose anybody. Next stop: Relief City! Two cars ahead was the flatcar with a complement of one spidermind, one steam-demon, and one human wrapped like a Christmas mummy and strapped down tight. The spidermind was between us and the human, the steam-demon on the other side.

It occurred to me that these superior examples of alien monster-building might sniff us out better than the lesser breeds; and the wind did a lot to erase our lemon odor. In our favor, we were way downwind. The wind was so damned loud, I didn't think they could hear us either.

I gestured to Arlene. Time for the Deimos veterans to do their stuff. We crawled closer, where I could see a very narrow gap between the cars … too narrow for the adults.

I noted the fact that the spidermind was so big, a couple of its right feet dangled limply over the side of the flatcar … and that gave me an idea. But it was too narrow for the adults. Only Jill could fit.

Oh man, this was my nightmare come true. It was never supposed to be a walk for the kid—but this? Throw the raw recruit, not even driving age yet, into the meat grinder against a spidermind and a steam-demon? It was criminal … homicidal! But what were the options? Not even Arlene could squeeze into that slender space; she probably outweighed Jill by forty pounds. They were like two different species, and thinking of me or Albert down there was a joke.

Feeling my gut clench, as well as another part of my anatomy, I said to myself: Time for the recruit to do her stuff.

The levity didn't work. I still felt sick. We crawled back and huddled with the others in the gap between two cattle cars full of zombies, where we could hear each other, at least. I felt like a class-A creep giving Jill her assignment; but nobody else could do it. Anyway, the kid seemed eager, not afraid. She'd make a good Marine. Did I say that before? This time, my plan had more details: Jill would shimmy down into the tiny gap between the two cars, using some of the webbing. "Just like Spiderman!" she said. Well, whatever. We'd use all the positive fantasy images floating in her mind. She had to believe in herself absolutely to pull this off. If they spotted Jill, she'd be dead meat, and the rest of us with her. Once she made it into the gap, she would very carefully loop the webbing several times over the nearest limb of the spidermind and pull it tight—without allowing the spidermind to notice it was being hobbled. She would attach the other end of the webbing to the titanium grappling hook the President had included in Albert's gear. We could do that before she started out. We'd lose the hook and some of our webbing, but with luck, we'd lose the spidermind as well.

"If she makes it that far," I said, wrapping up, "she drops the hook to the ground beneath the wheels and ducks, waiting for it to catch on a tie or something." "And that gross bug gets yanked off!" she said, grokking the plan immediately. "Gnarly idea, Fly!" I let her savor the image of the alien brain scattered across the countryside. Slamming into the car behind at better'n 300 per ought to do the trick nicely, and "Spider-ma'am" would defeat the spider creep with a thick dose of poetic justice.

Now all we had to do was make it work.

While Arlene and Albert prepared the hook and line, Jill let me wrap it around her waist. She asked me to do it personally. That meant a lot to me. Then I gave her a gentle push forward and hoped Albert's God wouldn't choose this moment to desert us. I put in a good word for Jill with the nuns as well. Jill climbed down the side of the car we were on, two cars back from the flatcar. So far, so good. I climbed down after her.

We crept forward at wheel level, crawling alongside spinning death so slowly, it made our previous trek along the roof seem like a drag race. Mother Mary, I thought, please

don’t let there be any fence posts too close to the tracks!

We very carefully worked our way around the wheels; but if we were any higher up the train, the spidermind might have us in its sights. Hunkering down at wheel level, we were hidden by the side of the car itself.

There was enough light to keep Jill in my personal viewfinder every step of the way. I imagined her knuckles were white. Mine sure as hell were. I kept pressed right up against her back, my arms on either side of hers to make sure she didn’t slip. We finally got to the edge of the flatcar; now the show was entirely Jill’s, and all I could do was hang and wait.

23

Cheese and rice, I felt like a weenie when he took me outside the train. I swore myself I wouldn't eff-up any more. For the mome, Fly respected me, and Arlene too. I didn't care so much about Albert, but he was all right for one of the LDs.

Now was my chance to prove to everyone! Maybe I almost wrecked the truck when those missiles went through, and maybe they don't know how close they came to being hosed. But if I pulled this off, I'd make up for everything! Plus I'd pay back one of those crawly bastards for what they did to my mom. And Dad.

He was right, the slot was a tight fit, even for me; but I could wiggle through. I don't know what they would have done without me for this. As I slid along, I got grease on me. Gagged me out at first, but then I was glad, cuz it made me more slippery. Huh, like to see one of those wimp LD girls do this! She'd faint, and the human race would lose the war.

Suddenly, I saw a thin, silver thing sticking over the edge. Got wide on the end. I didn't recognize it at first, seeing it so close up. Then I gasped—it was a spidermind foot! It was bigger than I thought. It was bigger than I was!

The end of the foot fluffed out like bell-bottom pants, like my grandparents wore, like on the Brady Bunch. God, I was glad they didn't live to see the monsters kill their children.

I stretched, flipping the webbing, trying to loop the foot; but I couldn't reach that far! That PO'ed me—I was going to dweeb-out just cuz my arms weren't like an orangutan's.

Then the leg twitched. I screamed and jumped—and fell.

I slipped down, banging my knee and barely catching the edge of the flat thing … my face was an inch from the tracks.

Oh Lord—the wind blew off the ties, freezing my cheeks, and I smelled smoke. I think I even … well, peed my pants. Shaking like a leaf, I hauled myself back up. I spared a glance back at Fly; he looked like he might have peed his pants too. I shrugged—sorry! I'm sorry, but hacking systems would never seem serious after this. Just a toy. This was real. I knew I was taking a big chance, but there was no way else to reach the foot: I

rested my knee on the bed of the flatcar and stretched higher, and then I could reach the leg.

The spider moved again! I wasn't able to get back down before the leg pinned me back against the firewall of the car behind. I was stuck like a fly in the spidermind's web.

I didn't make a sound; I could barely breathe, but I didn't panic this time—I didn't have any you-know-what left. It didn't know I was there … so I hung. It would kill me the second it realized I was there, same way I'd crush a bug; I was still alive because I was hidden from view by the huge leg itself. 'Course, it might kill me without ever knowing I was there; if it put its weight on that foot, it would pulverize me. The place where it had me firmest against the wall was at my knee. The upper part of my body could still move. I still had a good reach. So I did what I came to do. I didn't let myself think what would happen if I failed.

I passed the webbing four times around the leg. My heart froze each time. I was in Girl Scouts once; the only thing they taught me that I still remember was how to tie a square knot. I tied the best buggin' square knot of my whole life!

Great. What next? Next you die, girl.

I thought I would cry, but my eyes were dry. My mouth was parched and my heart raced, but that was all. When I thought about all the stupid things we cry about, like boys and grades and losing a best girlfriend, it seemed strange I didn't cry then. Then something happened inside. I felt calm for the first time since I saw the monsters. I didn't mind dying if I could take one bastard with me. A big one. I unslung the grappling hook and let it dangle between the cars. Pinned against the wall, I wouldn't be able to duck down. Once I dropped the hook, the spider would be yanked to a stop as the train kept moving, and I would be crushed to a grease smear. Thought about my new friends. Thought about what if Fly had kissed me. Thought about wishing I was anywhere else. Then I let go of the hook.

24

I didn't know what was going on with Jill, couldn't see a thing. She fell and screamed, and I'd popped around and seen her half under the track; then the spidermind shifted and I had to leap back. Now I didn't dare show myself—I'd get us both killed.

I thought Jill would have finished by now. I'd bet money she wouldn't lose her nerve. Either she was still waiting for an opening, or something had gone wrong.

Then I heard the heavy thud and metal-scraping sound that could only be the hook dropping under the train. It bounced up and down, over and over, while I waited and waited and waited for that big mother with the brain and the legs to be yanked into oblivion. What happened next was so stupid and unlikely, it was like crapping out ten times in a row: the damned hook bounced up and hooked onto the train itself! The little voice in the back of my head I hadn't heard from recently chose this moment to speak to me in the voice of an old kids' science show: So, Flynn, what have we learned from today's experiment? Well, Mr. Wizard, we've learned that if the train is moving at the same speed as the spider-bastard, absolutely nothing will happen!

I humped back hand over hand, ducking down to check under the train, looking for the hook. Saw it! I slid through the train's shock absorbers. Time for more help from the nuns. If we hit a bump, the shocks would slice me in half. Suddenly, the train itself seemed like one of the monsters.

I made it through, then slid along the undercarriage on my back across the covered axles, under the train, until I could reach the flippin' hook. The damned thing was caught on an Abel.

I reached for the sucker and succeeded in touching it. Yep, there it was. Touching it was a cinch. I could touch it all I wanted without falling onto the track and being ground to hobo stew.

Getting it loose was the problem.

Once upon a time, I won a trophy in junior high gymnastics; there were only five of us, but I was the best in that class. I thought I was pretty hot stuff that day. Looked to be the moment for an encore performance.

I went looser with the legs, increasing the possibility of falling but giving me a longer reach. I didn't want to perform this trick more than once.

Not only did this stunt run the risk of my becoming part of the track, there was the extra worry of losing the duck gun dangling precariously from my back. Not having my weapon could be as close to a death sentence as getting run over by the Little Train that Could.

I got my hand around the hook, heaved, and yanked it free. I did a war whoop worthy of a Comanche … then I shut my eyes—I hate the sight of my own bloody, mangled corpse—and dropped the thing to the ground.

This time the law of averages was enforced by the probability police. The hook caught on a spar and held. I gripped my perch and braced for impact. I clenched my whole body as the webbing tightened—then the freaking stuff broke. It wasn't supposed to do that! The end whipped like an enraged snake, lashing across my back. But I didn't let go. I waited for the sound of that massive body being yanked to its doom. Still there was plenty of nothing. This was becoming irritating. But there was something: despite the howling of the wind and the machine pounding of steel wheels on steel rails, I heard a high, piping squeal. It sounded like a scream from hell.

As I began clambering back through the shocks and up the side of the train, I heard explosions. Something was happening. I climbed faster … to be greeted by the scene of the steam-demon shooting its missiles at the spidermind. The latter was at a disadvantage, listing as it moved, badly off balance. The webbing had torn one leg off the monstrosity. It didn't take a rocket scientist to figure out what happened next. Losing a leg would put the spidermind in a bad mood. It wouldn't be philosophical about it. No, it would fire a burst from its guns at the only target in sight: the steam-demon. For all their power, these guys had a weakness as deep as the ocean. Conquerors and masters need some self-control.

My primary goal now was to find Jill and get her out of here; but I didn't see her from this angle. She was probably still hugging the other side of the flatcar where she had lassoed the spidermind's leg. The train hit a bad bump, exactly the impact that would have left me beside myself when 1 was doing my Tarzan of the shocks routine. The two monsters took the bump personally and increased the ferocity of the battle. I realized the high piping sound was from the spider—it probably made the noise when it lost its leg. The steam-demon emitted more human-sounding screams.

The wind seemed to be picking up, but neither contestant paid any attention to the weather. As I watched the spidermind tear up the steam-demon with a nonstop barrage

from the Gatling gun, I remembered how difficult Arlene and I had found taking one of these down before. The demon was nothing compared to the other.

But if there were a cosmic bookie keeping tabs on this one, the final decision was still in doubt. The steam-demon followed the optimum strategy for his position, firing missile after missile at the robot exterior to the spidermind's brain. Cracks were beginning to appear.

I stayed put, praying for the best possible outcome. By the time the spidermind's brain case finally exploded, the steam-demon was so ripped it could barely stand. Under the circumstances, things were working out better than the original plan. After all, if the spidermind had been eliminated as intended, we would still have had to contend with the problem of the steam-demon.

While I was congratulating myself on the turn of events, the train took a sudden turn and the tottering, cybernetic creature nearly fell off the flatcar. That would have been the perfect climax to the duel of the titans.

Dawn started to streak the horizon with a sickening shade of green. The improved light made it much easier to pick out details of the local terrain; such as the high rock gorge we were just then passing over, thanks to a narrow bridge. This would be a splendid place for the steam-demon to take its final rest. The perfect end, as I'd already thought, to the perfect battle. Then I could find Jill and congratulate her on a mission well done.

The only flaw in this scenario consisted of a single claw—the claw the steam-demon used to grab hold and save itself as it fell right next to me. Right next to me!

It was bad enough seeing the demon this close up. Far worse … it saw me. As weak and near death as the thing was, it recognized a living human a few inches away. Very slowly, it raised its missile hand. It was slow; I was a whole lot faster. I back-drew my double-barreled shotgun and fired both barrels, one-handed, squeezing both triggers simultaneously. Quite a kick. The blast tore off its entire hand at the wrist… the gripping hand.

The steam-demon plummeted off the car to the ground, exploding noisily as it got off one last missile shot that went straight up through the track ahead of the train, in between the rails, right on a curve in the bridge.

The train didn't bother slowing as it rolled over the missile-damaged point. I could imagine a cartoon demon with an engineer's cap, throwing back a shot of the good old hooch and not worrying about the condition of the track ahead.

As we passed, I saw in greenish daylight growing brighter by the minute that part of the inside rail was bent up from the blast. If it had been the outside rail instead, we would have plunged into the gorge. The President of the Twelve would've needed to audition a new act.

"Jill!" I howled. "Jill!" Climbing up to the flatcar was easy, but I suddenly had a cramp deep in my back. It was so bad that it paralyzed me for a moment. I wouldn't let something like that stop me now. I twisting around trying to loosen up, still calling, "Jill, Jill!"

Where the hell was that kid? I was starting to worry.

I reached the end of the flatcar, looked down … and saw her there, gazing up at me with wide eyes. "You all right?"

She nodded, but not a word came out. Maybe she was suffering from shock. I reached down and she took my hand. I didn't care about the twinge in my back now. I hauled her up.

"Great!" I said.

"Alive?"

"Of course!"

"Oh." She still seemed not entirely sure. I grabbed and hoisted her. Now my back felt fine, and for a crazy moment the sick-o green dawn looked beautiful.

I put her down. The mummy and we were alone on the flatcar now.

A warm glow spread through me, not unlike the warm jet of a hot tub. My old voice spoke, something good for once: The debt is nearly paid. What debt? Oh. The debt of my stupidity in bringing assault onto the enclave.

That debt.

"Wait here." I could have sent her up the ladder to signal the others to join us, but she had earned a rest as far as I was concerned. Her vacation from hell might not last longer than a few minutes, but I wanted her to enjoy every second before I ordered her to face death yet again. I got them myself, bringing them to the cacophonous flatcar.

Arlene and Albert looked as exhausted as Jill, and as tired as I felt. Next time, we'd fly. Arlene bent over and began unwrapping, revealing the face of another human in a world where being human was something special.

Huddling against the forty or fifty kilometer per hour wind that leaked around the engines and air dam ahead of us, remnants of the 300 kph hurricane two meters either left or right, we crouched over our mummy, staring. We saw the features of a black man, mid-thirties. As we shifted him around on the platform, I estimated his weight at about sixty-four kilos. Not a bad weight for 1.7 meters.

"What done him?" Jill shouted. A good question, though I could barely hear her small voice over the roar of train and wind. Computer and electronic jacks were all over his flesh, stuck like pins into a doll. He was unconscious. There were so many jacks, he'd probably be in extreme pain if awake.

Arlene pulled the lid back from his right eye, revealing a cloudy white orb, so completely glazed over that you couldn't make out a pupil. Even after encountering a who's who of monsters, fiends, and other denizens of hell, something really bothered me about seeing this helpless man before me. He didn't reek like sour lemons, thank God. He was no zombie.

I still hadn't discussed with Jill or Albert what Arlene and I had mulled over—namely, the possibility that the Bad Guys were trying for more perfect human duplicates. Practice makes perfect. We had no idea how the zombies were created. Sometimes I thought they really were the reanimated dead; but other times I could buy the idea they were transformed while still alive. However the enemy was doing it, the lemon stink was a by-product of dealing with real human bodies.

If the enemy ever made perfect human copies from scratch, there would be no lemon smell, or anything else to give them away.

Arlene tried various methods of waking up the man, even slapping him in the face, but nothing worked. She looked at me and shrugged.

Jill reached out and gingerly touched one of the jacks sticking out from the man's flesh. She managed to look crafty and thoughtful, even with her red hair whipping around her face like a brushfire. She fingered the jack again and scowled. Then Jill looked at me and mimed typing on a keyboard. She raised her brows. What… ? I blinked; light finally dawned on marblehead. She wanted to hack this guy's brain?

Well why the hell not?

We all crowded around the mummy, making a windbreak for Jill. Leaning so close, I could actually make out a few words. “Need—jack—find out what—wants to fight—can’t promise it’ll—might be the break …”

I couldn’t hear everything, but I got the gist. The real question was what on earth was inside that brain that was worth the protection of a spidermind and a handful of steam-demons? Back on Phobos and Deimos, the alien technology we had seen was different, biological somehow. They used cyborgs, combination biological-mechanical, like the spidermind itself. Was that what this dude was, some sort of link between humans and alien technology?

Or the other way around?

Well, whatever. We weren’t going to find out anything in a wind tunnel… somehow, some way, we simply had to get this guy off the damned train. Somehow I doubted we could just ring the bell and say “Next stop, conductor.”

I hoped the cybermummy would be enough of a son of a bitch to join us when we unwrapped him. “Vacation over!” I bellowed over the gale. “War on!” Arlene gave me a dirty look, so I knew that the awesome responsibility of command still rested on my shoulders.

The man seemed physically manhandled and bruised, but not seriously damaged, except for their attempt to transform him into an appliance. The question was, how would we get him off the train? If we waited until we rolled into the station in L.A., I could imagine a slight difficulty in persuading a large contingent of, say, steam-demons into helping us with our cargo. The absence of the spidermind from the flatcar would take a bit of explaining as well. We lacked the firepower to make our argument completely convincing.

“Suggestion,” rumbled Albert. It was hard to pick out his words; the timbre of his voice was too close to the throb of the engines, and he wasn’t a good shouter. No practice, probably. I only caught some of what he said and wasn’t too sure about what I did catch.

“Father—trains! Trick or treat—Jill’s age—incorrect car—aggravates—emerging break … !” I stared, trying to parse the incomprehensible “plan.” Trick or treat? Jill’s age aggravates the emerging break?

Or was that brake—emergency brake! Something about an emergency brake.

He tried again: “Couple of cars!” he hollered.

“Couple—car!”

Couple of car. Cars? No, car … couple-car. I smacked my forehead. Decouple the car. Which must activate, not aggravate, the emergency brake. Jesus and Mary! What a nightmare; a loud one!

That seemed like a plenty good plan to Yours Truly. Hauling the mummy up to the semiprotected roof, we staggered overhead toward the last car; that’s the one we would decouple. The train was going as fast as before, but we humped a lot faster along the roof this time. Killing the spidermind and steam-demon worked wonders for our self-confidence. Jill’s attitude was so changed that I could probably dangle her over the edge, holding onto her ankles, without her showing a quiver, though I was glad we didn’t require such a demonstration.

There were three cattle cars, which we had to pass by creeping along the sides, centimeters away from staring zombies. I thought sure they’d start shooting at us—what a time to die! At least the demons wouldn’t keep their mummy.

But the reworked humans merely stared with malignant stupidity. They’d been given no orders, you see …just like bureaucrats at the Pentagod. When we reached the last car, an enclosed cargo car, I looked down through the slatted roof to see that the interior was stuffed with zombies. As expected. Albert slid down between the cars in search of the emergency decoupler. After checking it, he climbed back up and shouted, “When?”

Another good question. We didn’t want to be stuck in the middle of the desert. If we hung until the suburbs of L.A., we should be able to hold our own combatwise and be close enough to supplies, shelter, and other transportation.

I tried to remember the L.A. geography. “River-side!” I shouted. That is, assuming the train passed through Riverside. If not, any eastern bedroom community would do.

Seeing was considerably easier in the daylight, even in the pale green light. For the moment, I didn’t even mind the greenish hue of an alien sky. Get rid of these damned invaders, and we could look up at the natural color of blue minus the gray haze for which L.A. was famous. It would take a lot of work increasing the population to get everything back to normal, but it would be a satisfying challenge.

“Single!” hollered Albert. Why was he telling me that? “Single in couple!” Whoops—signal when he should decouple the car. He climbed back down. Arlene tossed me a faint nod and half smile, then gingerly slithered down the ladder and joined him.

25

Fly was too good a friend for me not to be honest with him. But I was so surprised how fast things were going that there wasn't anything for me to say. Who could talk in this breeze, anyway? Fly, like most guys, made certain assumptions about women. When we decided just to be friends, I expected a certain strain. But we were pals, buddies, comrades. I liked it that way.

But bring another man into the picture, and there are consequences. Fly was a big brother. He never did take to Willie; and I don't think he ever thought there'd be the slightest chance I'd ever fall for a religious dude—especially a Mormon!

"Fall" was a bad image. I squeezed down between the surging cars, watching the river of brown streaks racing below us as the ground sped past. Albert stood on the metal tongue-thing that held the cars together; he kept switching his grip back and forth as the cars shimmied. I never realized they moved that much. I was falling for Albert. Crazy, buggin', retarded. Nothing short of the end of the world could have brought this about.

One "end-of-the-world," order up! Maybe we could reverse what had happened and give the human race a reason to go on living. Survivors. Those who refused to go down until the fat monster sang.

On Phobos, I thought I might be the only human being left alive in the universe. Then on Deimos, I thought Fly and I might be the only two human beings.

However few there were on Earth to stand against the invader, all that mattered was that Fly and I were no longer alone. And looking down on the wide shoulders of my new friend, I hoped I'd be "un-alone" in other ways too.

Drawing near, I saw his lips moving, reciting words that could have been from the Bible for all I knew. Some kind of prayer, I reckoned; it seemed to calm him, give him courage. Guess there's some good in religion after all, if you knew where to look. I wondered if he had the entire Book of Mormon memorized, or just the "good parts," the passages that suited his prejudice? I knew, somehow, that Albert wasn't like that—maybe the first guy I ever met who guided his lifestyle by his faith, instead of the other way around.

He stopped, looked up at me and smiled. With an opening like that, he could hardly blame me for taking the next step farther down the ladder.

“Albert!” I shrieked. He said something, but I couldn’t hear him. I was probably embarrassing him. That was nothing new for me when it came to interpersonal relationships. “I find you really attractive!” I bellowed romantically, secure in the knowledge that he couldn’t hear a damned word. Then I shut up and listened to the train wheels. “Something mumble something,” he said. Damn, he was embarrassed. But he pressed on, as brave with me as he’d been with the monsters. Now why did I make such a comparison? Typical, Arlene, I said to myself; always your own worst critic.

I don’t mean to make you uncomfortable, I silently mouthed into the maelstrom.

He shook his head and shrugged, which might have meant, 7 don’t have the faintest idea what you’re saying … but I preferred to interpret it as Nonsense, darling; my religion is really important to me, but so are you—and I know how you feel about it, He had me there. I didn’t want to say anything right then. Physical combat can be so much easier than the other kind! I listened to the steady rhythm of the train wheels pounding in my skull like a .50 caliber machine gun, drowning out even the 300 kph typhoon we rolled through. The irregular rattling sound of the coupler, waiting for Albert’s hands to reach down and seize it, sounded like ground-to-air artillery. I looked at the ground unfurling beneath us like a giant banner; then I looked up at blurs that might be trees or telephone poles, shading a dawn green as a lime before it rotted and became zombie lotion. “I can’t give you what you want,” I said at normal speaking volume. Even 7 couldn’t hear me. He said nothing, but looked up shyly at me. I liked him calling me beautiful. With his eyes, at least. I liked it a lot. Being honest came more easily now that we were both admitting our mutual attraction. Well, you know what I mean—this wasn’t exactly the best spot for a romantic conversation; but I knew what he would be admitting if I could hear him.

It wasn’t only that I had problems with his religion;

I didn’t like any of them. I don’t like turning over moral authority to a bearded ghost that you can’t find when everything blows up.

Besides, we might not be compatible in other ways. Hah, how pure Arlene that was! Telling the man I wanted all the reasons why it would never work. I was grateful that it was so noisy down here that Fly couldn’t hear a word. Time to shift from negatives to positives.

“But Albert, we could give it a try,” I said, not caring that I was basically talking to the wind and the wheels. He wasn’t even looking at me at the moment, concentrating on keeping his balance and not losing a finger in the metal clacking thing.

“We could, like, date. You know, spend a few nights together, if we live through this. Who knows? Something might happen.”

Again he left me to contemplation of the train and the terrain. He was obviously struggling over what I’d said. It was pretty obvious that four forces were fighting in him at this moment: morality, manners, moi, and volume-comma-lack of.

Finally he worked up his nerve, craned his neck again where he could look me in the eye and said, “Something rumble something question mark?” Now that was a conversation stopper. But I only let it stop us for a moment. “You mean, you’re a virgin?” I asked, incredulous.

He tilted his head to the side; was that a yes?

“But you’re a Marine!” I howled in amazement. I burst out laughing at my own outburst. The Church of the Marine loomed larger in my mind than any competing firm.

Of course, there are Marines who remain loyal to their wives or abstain from sex for religious reasons. Hey, fornication is not part of the job description! Amazing, but true. Still, the odds were against the clean-living Marine. “You ever heard the phrase, ‘There are no virgins in foxholes’?” I asked. He watched my animated, one-sided dialogue—it wasn’t really a monologue—in puzzlement, tortured soul that he was. I couldn’t give up that easily. What about the various ports and landing zones he must have visited on his sea tour? Bombay, Madrid, Manila, Hong Kong, Calcutta, Kuwait City! Albert smiled at me again. Progress! I had an admission. I knew how I would conduct the cross-examination: “So tell me, Mr. Marine Corps sniper, did you never visit any of the local sex scenes? The cages of Bombay that hang over the street, where you have sex with a pross in full view? The port-pros in Manila? The Hong Kong sex tours, where a soldier with a few bucks in his pocket can visit a dozen knocking shops in a day and a half? Kefiri City, with more glory holes than any other … ? You don’t know? Uh, you place your you-know-what through a hole in a wall and somebody on the other side does, you know.

Yeah, maybe it was morals. Maybe he just didn’t want his gun to turn green and fall off. The angle was probably tough on his neck, but he swiveled his body a little so he could almost face me. “Something jumble something interrogative?” Me? Well no, not exactly. He stared at me awhile longer. No, those places tend to be attractions for a male Marine. What would I do with a glory hole, for Pete’s sake?

Heh, I could work the other side, theoretically. All right; he might have been naive in some ways, but he was a man of the world in others. The contradictions in this big man appealed to me. He contained multitudes.

I reached out and touched his cheek, glad he didn't pull away. I was afraid he might have been ready to write me off as a Marine slut. No dice; I was a responsible girl… responsible behavior in today's world meant carry extra loads and sleep with both eyes open. To quote everybody's third-favorite weird German philosopher, Oswald Spengler:

Life, if it would be great, is hard; it demands a choice only between victory and ruin, not between war and peace. And to the victors belong the sacrifices of victory. For that which shuffles querulously and jealously by the side of the events is only literature.

Hey, that could be our first date! We hurl quotations at each other from thirty paces!

26

Riverside was coming up fast, so I took another look down at Arlene and Albert. They seemed to be carrying on a deeply meaningful conversation, though the Blessed Virgin only knew how they could possibly hear each other over that racket. It seemed impolite to stare, so I focused my attention on the horizon. There was a war to fight, a war to fight. “Albert! Now!” I boomed at peak volume as the town raced up to greet us. Albert and Arlene started yanking on a lever atop the coupler. They heaved again and again, until I thought we’d be cruising into Grand Central before they got the bloody thing unhooked. Then it cracked open and the cars separated with an explosive bang.

The pneumatic brakes activated automatically, slowing the loose car we were on while the rest of the train sped on, oblivious, impervious. I wondered if the aliens would even notice that a car was missing. We destroyed the spidermind; did they have enough initiative even to count?

We braked toward a stop, more or less terrifyingly. The rails screamed, the car rocked and rolled. Jill held on for dear life, looking as green as the sky. Arlene and Albert kicked back, cool to the max. I was too busy watching everybody else to notice whether I was cool or freaked: I didn’t want one of my crew to fall under the wheels and be crushed to death without me being instantly aware of it.

I couldn’t bring myself to abandon the car without expressing an opinion on the zombies sardine-canned below. I positioned myself and fired a bunch of rounds through the roof slats. This riled them up, and they behaved in the approved manner. They attacked each other with mindless ferocity.

As the car came to a complete stop, Albert and I managed the cybermummy between us quite easily. We hopped down and bolted for cover in an alley. The streets of Riverside were like the valleys of a lost civilization or the canyons of a mysterious planet. We beat cleats up and down to throw off any alien patrols.

Although deep in the heart of enemy territory, surrounded by more monsters than at any other time since returning to Earth, it was a relief to be off the train. I didn’t know about the others, but I was for solid ground underfoot again.

There was no way to tell what were the mummy’s requirements for life support. Perhaps with an IV he could survive indefinitely in his present condition; but there was no way for us to be certain without direct communication.

Meanwhile, Arlene and Jill took point and tail, respectively. We were at the part of the mission where we were truly interchangeable, except for the necessity of keeping Jill alive until she could do her computer trick. Nowhere was safer than anywhere else. We whisked through street and alley, avoiding patrols of roving monsters. We ran, carrying the mummy like old bedclothes between us. Putting the mummy down for a moment, Albert pointedly asked of Jill, "Are there any safe houses around here?" Digging into her pack, Jill produced that small, portable computer, the CompMac ultramicro, more compact than any I'd seen before.

"Where'd you get that?" asked Arlene.

Jill answered with a lot of pride: "Underground special—built by the Church. You can get inventions out fast when you don't have to worry about FCC regs and product liability lawsuits."

She called up her safe-house program and then told all of us to look away. I doubted that I'd turn to stone if I didn't comply. Anyway, I complied … and listened to her type in about thirty characters—her key code, obviously. When she was finished, I looked at her again as she scrutinized her screen. She nodded and pressed her lips firmly together, a sure sign in my book of Mission Accomplished. "There's a safe house about a mile from here on Paglia Place," she said. Then she called up a map of Riverside and showed the rest of the route the program suggested.

"I see a problem with part of this," said Arlene. "The route goes within a couple of blocks of an old IRS field office where I used to deliver papers while I was a courier."

"Courier? What for?" asked Jill.

"For two years of college."

"Whadja get?"

"Minimum wage. Fifteen per hour, OldBucks."

"No, I mean what degree!"

"Oh. A.A. in engineering and computer programming," answered Arlene, embarrassed. I could imagine why. Arlene's degree must seem awfully trivial compared to what Jill had picked up on her own. Jill nodded. "Hip," she said, without dissing my pal, for which I was grateful. The gal was a pretty grown-up fourteen-year-old, astute enough to recognize that Arlene was very touchy about only going to a two-year college. She couldn't afford any longer. We followed the revised route Arlene traced.

I had some advice that nobody wanted to hear:

“Fly’s prime directive is not to use firearms unless ab-so-lute-ly necessary!”

Jill was the first critic. “But Fly, it’s not like they’re human.”

“Using martial arts might only entertain them,” Arlene added. “I’m not even sure a shiv would bother them, assuming you can find their ribs to stick it between.”

“Is everyone finished?” I asked, a bit impatiently. “I’m not getting all liberal; I mean the wrong noise at the wrong moment could bring down a horde on our heads.”

“Oh, why didn’t you say so?”

I wished there were a quick course I could take in monster aikido; failing that, I’d settle for learning where they kept their glass jaws, so a quick uppercut could do the trick.

We padded up dark alleys and narrow streets, trying to stay out of the sun. After a couple of klicks, Arlene suddenly stopped cold. When the Marine taking point does that, it’s time for everyone to play Living Statue. We froze and waited.

Jill, for all her fighting instincts, didn’t have the training. She started to ask what was wrong, but I clamped a hand over her mouth. Arlene continued facing forward but gestured behind her for the rest of us to backtrack. We did it very slowly; whatever it was hadn’t noticed us yet, and I aimed to keep it that way. We backed up about a hundred meters before she let out her breath.

“Remember the fatty we saw back at the train depot?” she asked. “We just bumped into its older, wider brother.”

We’d been so busy that I never got around to getting her to name that mobile tub of lard; but I instantly knew the creature she meant. I’d hoped that maybe the thing was an exception to the rule, an accident rather than a standard design. I preferred fighting monsters that didn’t make me sick.

“I thought it was a huge pile of garbage,” Arlene whispered intently.

Blinking into the darkness ahead, I finally made out a huge shadow shifting among the other shadows. The thing roused itself with the sound of tons and tons of wet burlap dragged across concrete. It stood to a height of two meters, only my height actually, but weighing at least four hundred kilos. The density and width of the thing was incredible.

The fatty—if we lived through this one, I hoped I could talk Arlene into a better name—made slush-slush sounds as it moved. It was probably leaving something disgusting behind it, like a snail track. In the massive, shapeless, metal paws that encased or replaced its hands, the fatty held some kind of weird, three-headed gun.

The thing wasn't facing us. It stood sideways, trying to figure out from which direction had come the noise disturbing its repose. Then it turned away from us, giving us an unobstructed view of its mottled, disgusting back. It made a horrible, rasping noise that I guessed was the sound of its breathing. I pointed in the other direction … but just then we heard stomping feet approaching up the block that way. A troop of monsters. Just what we needed! They were led by a bony. If we didn't know how dangerous it could be, it would seem sort of funny, leading them with that jerking-puppet gait. There was nothing amusing about being trapped between a fatty in front and the Ghoul Club behind, between hammer and anvil, with no side streets or doors to duck into.

Albert sighed. I watched his shoulders untense. He unslung his weapon with casual ease, as though he had all the time in the world; which in a way he did. He was ready to die for the "cause," whether that was us or the rest of whatever.

Me, I was ready to live for mine.

Jill's face went utterly white, but she didn't give any indication of bugging. After the flatcar, she was a seasoned vet. Like the rest of us, she had that special feeling of living on borrowed time. She clutched the ultramicro to her chest, more upset about failing than dying. She contemplated our mummy with regret; she'd never get the hack of a lifetime! Arlene whispered "Cross fire" a nanosecond before it occurred to me. Darting into the middle of the street, we had the bony in our sights. It stopped and immediately bent at the waist and fired its shoulder rockets. I hit the deck and Arlene dodged left. The rockets sailed over my head, one of them bursting against the big, brown back of the fatty. Enraged, the fatty located the source of this scurrilous, unprovoked attack. It raised both arms and fired three gigantic, flaming balls of white phosphorous at the bony.

The center ball hit, but the other two spread, striking other members of the bony's entourage, frying them instantly.

The surviving members were no happier than the fatty had been earlier; they opened fire, and the bony forgot all about us, firing two more rockets at fat boy. Meanwhile, my crew were very, very busy lying on their bellies and kissing dirt for all they were worth, hands over heads. All except me: I kept my hands free and rolled onto my back, shotgun pointing back and forth, back and forth, like a fan at a tennis match. I didn't want to call attention to our little party, but neither did I want us to be noticed by a

smarter-than-average monster who wanted to spill our guts to celebrate its position on the food chain. I wished it were still night.

The bony ran out of rockets before the fatty ran out of fireballs. The bone bag blew apart into tiny pieces, white shards so small they could be mistaken for hailstones, were this not Los Angeles.

The fatty kept firing. There were plenty of troops left to take out, and the walking flab seemed to have an inexhaustible supply of pyrotechnics. Maybe he got his stuff from the same shop used by the steam-demon.

At last, any troops left intact were no longer moving. The fatty kept firing for a while into their inert bodies.

When it stopped, nothing moved anywhere in sight—assuming those little pig eyes could see very far. We lay as still as we could; I wished we could stop the sounds of our breathing. A lump of congestion had settled somewhere in my head, and I wheezed on every second breath, but I was afraid to hold my breath for fear I would start coughing. Of course, the monster's hearing might not be any great shakes. I could see small black holes on either side of his lard-encrusted head. If those were ears, they seemed minuscule. I lay still, rationalizing and wheezing, hoping the thing would do anything except—except exactly what it did next. The fatty was badly shot and cut up, like a giant, spherical hamburger patty that had fallen apart on the grill. It rumbled and began to shuffle directly for us. If the monstrous thing stepped on one of us as it passed, it would be a messy death.

27

I decided if one of those massive feet were about to descend on any one of us, I would open fire. There might be a military argument for letting one of us die if the others were passed over, anyone but Jill, but—forget it. Not like that!

As fat boy stumped slowly in our direction, I realized with a sinking feeling that it was another genetic experiment copying the human form. The whole design was clearly functional, another killer-critter. But if they could make creatures this close to our basic body type, then they could do copies of us in time.

As these thoughts raced through my mind, the thing took one ponderous step after another, coming closer and closer—allowing for inspection of its nonhuman qualities. The skin was like that of a rhinoceros. Feed this lumpkin an all-you-can-eat buffet (with a discount coupon), and it might top out at half a ton. The bald head looked like a squashed football; the beady eyes took no note of us as it came within spitting distance. It had to be nearsighted. Now, if it were deaf and unable to smell, it might just miss us. Good news and bad: if fat boy continued walking a straight line, it would miss us all. Alas, Jill's ultramicro lay directly next to her, and the fatty was about to step on this critical piece of equipment. There wasn't time for anyone to do anything, except for Jill. All she had to do was reach out with her right hand and grab it. I saw her raise her head and start to move her hand, but she froze. What if it saw her!

With only a second to spare, she worked up her nerve and yanked the computer out of the way before the monster would have crushed it flat. By waiting so long, she solved her problem—the fatty couldn't see its own feet. The bulk of the vast stomach obscured Jill's quick movement.

Fat boy slogged on without further mishap. I was ready to heave a sigh of relief, clear my throat, maybe even enjoy a cough or two. Jill started to get up. Arlene and Albert weren't moving yet, waiting for the all-clear from Yours Truly. I almost gave it when a blast of machine-gun fire erupted behind the fatty. I was too damned tired to curse. We could use a short rest before taking on new playmates! The fatty wasn't happy about the turn of events either. It screamed with a sound more piglike than the pinkie demons.

The bullets sprayed in a steady stream, so many that some were surely penetrating that thick hide to disrupt vital organs—however deeply those organs were hidden underneath a stinking expanse of quivering flesh.

As the machine gun cut the monster to ribbons, I heard bug-wild, crazy laughter, the kind made only by a human being. The laughter continued, the bullets continued, until at last the fatty made the transition from hamburger to road kill. It made a wet, flopping sound, collapsed into itself and died.

We weren't playing statues while this was going on. Guns at the ready, firing positions, we faced … what looked like another human being. A very large human figure.

I almost called out, but I checked myself. Despite my gut-level joy at seeing another human, my innate suspicion held me back. After all, some real, live humans cooperated with the alien invasion. Sure, this guy shot the fatty; maybe he was on our side. But we couldn't be sure of that; and if he didn't come into the alley, he wouldn't see us. The alley was in deep shadow, hidden from even the pallid green light of a reworked sky.

Unfortunately, Jill was not a Marine. She was a young girl, and like most teenagers, she sometimes acted on auto pilot.

"You're human!" she yelped. Then she stopped suddenly, hand over her mouth, as if trying to push the words back inside. She realized what she had done. As to the consequences, she'd learn those in the next moment. So would the rest of us in the black alley.

The figure lifted a hand to its head and flipped back a visor over its helmet. The face underneath seemed human enough, from what I could see. He wasn't smiling. Jill made as if she might run, but she was thinking again. She wouldn't lead him back to us. "It's all right, little girl," he said, scanning, trying to locate her. "I won't hurt you." He took a tentative step in her direction, and she held her ground, not making another sound.

Silhouetted against the light gray wall of a carniceria, he was an impressive sight. But whose side was he on? This deep into enemy territory, we couldn't let anything compromise us, not even common sense or basic instincts.

Fighting monsters was so black-and-white that there was something clean about it. This man was not a monster. Were we about to have the firefight of our lives, a new ally, or a Mexican standoff? He didn't have a flash; probably figured he wouldn't need one in the daylight, such as it was. In the dark alley, however …

Silently, slowly, I slid my pair of day-night goggles out of my webbing and slipped them on, flicking the switch as I did so.

Now I could make out more of his gear: .30 cal machine gun, a belt-fed job; backpack full of ammo; radio gear; a flak jacket that screamed state-of-the-art body armor; and a

U.S. Army Ranger uniform, staff sergeant. “Come on out, little girl; let me see you. It’s all right.” He raised his hand as if scratching his chin stubble … but a crackling sound followed by a rumbling voice made it clear that he was talking into a handheld mike.

I also saw one more twist: he had a pair of distended goggles himself on his helmet—nightvis goggles, they had to be.

When Jill said nothing, he reached up for them. My heart pounded; as soon as he put them on, he would see all of us crouched in the shadows.

As if she sensed the danger—or maybe she knew she’d blown it and was trying to redeem herself—Jill stepped forward into the faint illumination reflected from the dragon-green sky by the pale wall of the Mexican meat market. “H-Here I am, sir,” she called. “Are you alone?” he asked.

Jill was a trooper. “Yes sir. I’m alone, sir.” Slowly, the man lowered his machine gun right at her small, narrow tummy. The universe became a still picture of the man, the gun, Jill… and my hand tightened on the trigger of my avenger. “Take it nice and easy,” he told Jill. “You’re comin’ to meet the boss.”

“Who’s that?” she asked, her voice firm. “We’ll get along a lot better,” he said, “if you get it through your head right now, bitch, that you don’t ask the questions.”

“What if I don’t want to go?” she asked.

“Then I’ll drop you where you stand,” he answered. The machine gun had not shifted an inch. “Now move it or lose it,” he said.

Jill moved all right, slowly and deliberately so he wouldn’t suspect anything. The gun followed her, and the sergeant turned his back to the alley; and I guess that’s what she intended all along, for she took a dive as soon as his body blocked the line of fire. I needed no second chance. Mister Mystery Ranger didn’t have the proper attitude toward “little girls.” Not by a long shot.

Unloading both barrels into the guy’s back got his attention. Arlene opened fire with her AB-10. Between the two of us, we gave him a quick and effective lesson in good manners.

He staggered, but managed to turn around. That armor of his was something! He started firing wildly while Arlene and Albert pumped more lead. I slammed two more shells home into my trusty duck-gun and let them go into the son of a bitch’s head.

The fancy headgear cracked like a colorful Easter egg and spilled out its contents. Surprise, you're dead! None of us moved for at least a minute, listening for the sound of more aliens attracted by the noise. There were no footsteps or nearby trucks, but we did hear sporadic gunfire in the distance. Probably zombies.

"Jill," Arlene called out. Jill returned with an expression that could only be described as sheepish. The girl was covered in dust but didn't have a scratch on her.

"I'm sorry," Jill volunteered; "I feel like a total dweeb." The apology didn't save her from Arlene. "That was a stupid mistake! You could have iced us all!"

Defiantly, Jill turned to me, Daddy against Mommy. I didn't say a word, didn't stop Arlene, didn't change expression. Sorry, kid—I'm not going to undermine my second just to save your ego. I didn't think it was that dumb a mistake; she was just a kid. But Arlene had chosen to make it an issue … and whatever I thought, I'd back her to the hilt. Jill started to blink, angrily holding back tears. She turned to Albert, but he was suddenly really busy wiping his gun barrel. Well—about time she learned: no hero allowances, and I guess no kid allowances, either.

"All right," she said, voice quavering. "What do you want me to do?"

Arlene stepped close, lowering her voice so I could barely hear it. "There's nothing you can do. You owe me, Jill; and before the mission is over, you are going to pay."

When Arlene stepped back, Jill's eyes were wide. The bravado and defiance were gone. She was scared to death … of Arlene Sanders.

The shock treatment seemed to work. Jill focused on something more important than her own short-comings. "God, is the mummy all right?" While Albert and Jill went to check out our recruit from the bandage brigade, I did an inventory on the soldier with the lousy manners.

Arlene joined me. "Was he a traitor?" she asked of the inert form at our feet; "or did we just kill a good guy?"

"Or worse, A.S. Is this that perfect genetic experiment we've been half-expecting ever since Deimos?"

"If he's Number Three," she said, "we'll have to—to give him a name." She kicked the side of the machine-guy with her boot. "I'll call him a Clyde."

"Clyde?" I asked, dumbfounded. "That's worse than fatty! It's just a name."

“Clyde, “she declared, with the really irritating tone of voice she only uses when she makes up her mind and can’t believe anybody would still be arguing. “But Clyde?” I repeated like a demented parrot. “Why not Fred or Barney, or Ralph or Norton?” I suspected that I might be spinning out of control. “For Clyde Barrow,” she explained … and I still didn’t get it. “You know,” she continued with the cultural-literacy tone of vice, “Bonnie Parker and Clyde Barrow—Bonnie and Clyde!”

“Oh,” I said, finally ready to surrender. “Jesus H., that’s really obscure!”

At the precise moment that I invoked the name of the Savior, good old Albert decided to rejoin us, reinforcing a theory I’ve had for years that if you call on the gods, you are rewarded with a plague of believers. Not that I was thinking of Albert as part of a plague just then. The plague was out there, beyond us, where it belonged—in the heart of Los Angeles.

28

I thought you had a Christian upbringing," said Albert, annoyed at Yours Truly for the blasphemy.

"Catholic school," Arlene answered.

"Oh, that explains it," said Albert, which I found a bit annoying.

Further discussion seemed a losing proposition. So I resumed investigation of the Clyde. Which reminded of the earlier discussion about nomenclature. "Hey, Jill," I called out. "We decided to name this bastard a Clyde."

"A Clyde?" asked Jill in the same tone of voice I had said "Jesus H."

"Yep."

"What a dumb name!" I decided to put her in my will. Make fun of my religion, will they? I went back to my close study of the Clyde. As I'd noticed before, he appeared fully human, if a bit large. Frankly, I didn't think he could be a product of genetic engineering; the results had been too crude up to this point. Most likely, he'd been recruited by the aliens.

I was sorry the man was dead, because I'd like to kill him again. It made me furious that any human would cooperate with the subjugation of his own race. I kicked the corpse.

Arlene was a good mind reader. "You think he's a traitor," she said.

"What else could he be?"

"You already suggested it."

"What's that?" asked Albert. Jill was all ears, too. The time had finally come to lay all the cards on the table.

"We've been considering the possibility that the aliens might be able to make perfect human duplicates," I told them.

"He could be one," said Arlene, pointing at the man. "Maybe the first example of a successful genetically engineered human. First example we've seen, anyway."

“I don’t buy it,” I said.

“But what makes you think it’s even possible?” asked Albert, obviously disturbed by the suggestion. Arlene took a deep breath. “On Deimos we saw gigantic blocks of human flesh. I’m sure it was raw material for genetic experiments. Later, Fly and I saw vats where they were mass producing monsters.” “In a way,” I interrupted, “even the boney and the fatty are closer to being ‘human’ than the other genetic experiments—hell-princes, steam-demons, pumpkins.”

“And now they’ve succeeded,” said Arlene, looking down.

“Hope you’re wrong,” I said. “It’s too much of a quantum leap, Arlene. Even the clothes are too good!” “You have an argument there,” she admitted.

“Those stupid red trunks on the boneys were awful.”

We looked at the spiffy uniform on the man. “He talked like a real person,” Jill observed. I hadn’t thought about it before, but everything about his manner of speaking rang true, even the threatening tone at the end. If he hadn’t been such a total bastard, I wouldn’t have enjoyed killing him so much. Making a monster was one thing; cobbling together a first-class butthead was a lot harder, requiring tender loving care.

“OK,” said Albert. “He looks, walks, talks and smells like a human being. So maybe he was one.” “Whatever he was, he’s good and dead; and that’s what matters right now,” I tried to conclude the issue. The way Arlene kept looking at the man meant that she couldn’t shake the disturbing idea that he was a synthetic creation. I didn’t doubt that they could do stuff like this in time. My objective was to prevent them having that time.

Arlene shuddered, then shook her head hard, as if dislodging any nasty little critters that might have snuck in there. “Well, if they did make him, he’s only a staff sergeant. There’s a lot of room for progress before they hit second lieutenant and start downhill again.”

Albert laughed hard at that. She gave him an appreciative glance.

In a way, it was kind of strange to nit-pick over which was more likely to be true: human traitors or human duplicates. Either possibility was disturbing. I let my mind wander over the uncertain terrain where treason sprouts like an ugly mushroom. If U.S. armed forces were cooperating with the aliens, were they under orders from the civilian government? Had Washington caved in immediately to become a Vichy-style administration? And what could the aliens offer human collaborators that the humans would be stupid enough to believe?

I didn't doubt for one second that the enemy intended the extermination of the human race as we knew it. Zombie slaves and a few human specimens kept around for experimental purposes didn't count as species survival in my book.

I must have been carrying worry on my face, because Albert put his hand on my shoulder and said, "We needn't concern ourselves over the biggest possible picture. One battle at a time is how we'll win this war. First, we destroy the main citadel of alien power in Los Angeles. Then we'll stop them in New York, Houston, Mexico City, Paris, London, Rome—ah, Tokyo…." He trailed off. Already quite a list, wasn't it?

"Atlanta," said Jill.

"Orlando," said Arlene. "We must save the good name of the mouse on both coasts!"

"You know," I mused, "I wonder how much of the invasion force Arlene and I destroyed on Deimos." "Oh, at least half," boasted my buddy; but she might not be far wrong. We killed a hell of a lot of monsters on the Martian moons. Each new carcass meant one less demonic foot soldier on terra firma. "You know," said Jill, her voice sounding oddly old, "I could kill every one of those human traitors." "I'm with you, hon," I agreed; "but you've got to be careful about blanket statements like that. Some were threatened, tortured. Hell, some could have been tricked. They didn't go through what we did on Deimos! They might have been told that the mass destruction was caused by human-against-human and now these superior aliens have come to Earth with a plan for ultimate peace."

"I'll bet YOU were a pain in your High School debate society, Fly Taggart," said long suffering Arlene. "But you know damn well what she means!"

"Put it down to my practical side, if you want," I said. "I like to know the score before I pick a play." Albert added a note. "Anyone can make a terrible mistake and still repent before the final hour." "It's possible," I said.

"I'm sorry I made that crack about your growing up Catholic."

The two atheist females acted suitably disgusted by our theological love-fest. "The girls don't believe in redemption of traitors, Albert," I said. "I'll pray for anyone," he said; "even traitors."

"Fine," said Arlene. "Pray over their graves." While we failed to resolve yet another serious philosophical issue, Jill squatted over the corpse. In a very short time she'd become hardened to the sight and smell of carnage. Good. She had a chance to survive in the new world.

“Are you all right?” Arlene asked.

“Don’t worry about me,” Jill said, following my example and kicking the corpse. “They’re just bags of blood, and we’ve got the pins. It’s no big thing.” No one was joking now. Arlene looked at me with a worried expression. This was no time to psycho-analyze a fourteen-year-old who was doing her best to feel nothing. This sort of cold attitude was par for the course in an adult, a mood that would be turned off (hopefully) in peacetime; but hearing it from a kid was unnerving.

The words just out of her lips were the cold truth we created. Do only the youngest soldiers develop the attitude necessary to win a war? Until this moment, I wouldn’t have thought of Arlene and myself as old-fashioned sentimentalists; but if the future human race became cold and machine-like to fight the monsters, then maybe the monsters win, regardless of the outcome.

Recreation time was over. Jill went to the cybermummy and started to lift him; he was really too heavy for her to do alone, and we got the idea. Albert helped her, and Arlene and I returned to battle readiness. The next goal was obvious: find the safehouse. We couldn’t make good time sneaking through the dark carrying a mummy.

We were only ninety minutes away. All we ran into along the way was a pair of zombies, almost a free ride. I popped them both before Arlene even got off a shot.

“You have all the fun,” said Albert. “This guy is starting to weigh!”

“You don’t hear Jill complaining, do you?” asked Arlene. Jill said nothing. But I could see the sweat beading on her forehead and her breathing was more rapid. Arlene noticed, too. “Jill, would you like to switch with me?” she asked.

“I’m all right,” she said, determined to prove something to someone.

Jill managed to hold up her end all the way to the door of the crappiest looking rattrap in a whole block of low rent housing. She heaved a sigh of relief as she finally put down her burden.

This stretch of hovels didn’t seem to have been bombed by anything but bad economic decisions. The house was one-story, shapeless as a cardboard box with a sheet of metal thrown on top pretending to be a roof. The yard was a narrow stretch of dirt with garbage piled high. It looked worse than any apartment I’d ever seen and gave the scuzziest motels a run for the money, if anyone with a dime in his pocket would be caught dead there.

The final perfect touch was a monotonous cacophony of dumb-ass, psychometal "music" blaring through the thin walls.

"Let me take it from here," Albert volunteered.

"Be my guest," I said.

He knocked on a flimsy door covered with streaks of peeling, yellow paint; I half expected the whole structure to crash down in a shambles. I figured we'd wait a long time before any denizens within roused themselves. Instead, the door opened within a few seconds.

It was like stepping back in time to the late twentieth century, when post-punks, headbangers, carpetbangers, and other odd flotsam of adolescent rage had their fifteen minutes.

There were two young men standing in the door-way: one was blond, the other was darker, black-haired, and possibly Hispanic. Rocko and Paco, for the moment.

Rocko didn't say anything, staring at us with glazed eyes, mouth partly open. The only good thing to say about them was that there was simply no way they had been taken over by alien invaders! Even monsters know when to give someone a pass.

"May we come in?" asked Albert.

"Stoked," said Rocko.

There seemed no alternative to going inside; there was no escape rocket in sight. Albert braved the cavern of terrible noise first, then Arlene, then Jill with our buddy. There was nothing left but for me to go inside and witness …

The living room. The place was stuffed with what looked like the world's largest and bizarrest crank-lab. There were chemicals of various colors in glass containers balanced precariously on the ratty furniture. A large bottle of thick, silver liquid looked like it might be mercury. I wondered if these guys would blow us up or poison us.

Jill laid the still-wrapped cybermummy on the ground. Then Albert stepped forward. Without saying a word, he flashed a hand-signal. I recognized it: light-drop hand signals, based partly on American Sign Language, heavily modified.

Earth, said Albert.

Man, responded Paco.

Native.

Born.

I blinked. Albert flashed a thirteen-character combination of letters and numbers, and Rocko responded with another. I raised my brows … a hand-signal "handshake."

All of a sudden, Rocko's demeanor changed as his face melted into a different one entirely. He gestured to Paco, who closed his mouth. Both suddenly looked fifty IQ points brighter.

Rocko went to the stereo, a nice, state-of-the art system out of place in these surroundings, and turned down the music. "Let's talk," he said, voice still sounding like a stereotypical carpetbanger. Things got too weird for Yours Truly. While Rocko rapped in a lingo full of terms relating to drugs and rock'n'roll, he produced several pads and pencils, enough for each one of us. The real conversation took place on the pads, while the duo spoke most of the mind-numbing nonsense, occasionally helped out by Albert and Jill, who could talk the talk better than Arlene or I.

The only part of the conversation I paid attention to came off the pads.

Our hosts filled in more details of this Grave New World. Rocko was actually Captain Jerry Renfrew, PhD, U.S. Army and head of one of the CBNW (chem-bio-nuke warfare) labs. His buddy was Dr. Xavier Felix, another chemical warfare specialist. But why did they pretend to be crystal-meth dealers?

Innocuous, no threat, explained Felix with a scribble.

Civilian DEA, Felix wrote. Pose crank cooker stuck fake crim recs into Nat Crime Info Cen comptrs. There was a noise halfway between a scream and a laugh. It was Jill, and she was jumping up and down. Out loud she said, "I haven't heard that group since I was a kid!" The music was still blaring in the background, even though reduced to a volume that didn't turn the brain to cottage cheese.

On paper, Jill wrote: I did that!!!!! Mightve done your's!

Too young, challenged Renfrew, erasing her apostrophe.

Judge/book/cover, argued Felix, added a circle slash around the triplet, the international no-no symbol. We passed all the notes around to everyone; but each person got them in

more or less random order. It took me a while to make sense out of the jumble. When everyone had seen a note, Felix or Renfrew touched it to a Bunsen burner. The notes were written on flash paper, and they vanished instantly with a smokeless flare.

According to Dr. Felix, the DEA, under alien control, was still staffed by traitorous humans, even now. They went hunting for people who could produce the "zombie-brew" chemical treatment used to rework humans into zombies.

They specifically hunted for the more sophisticated drug-lab chemists. It made sense that Captain Renfrew and Felix, both infiltrating from opposite ends, would come together.

When Felix's hand needed a rest, the captain jotted down: lab I headed one of few not overrun. He escaped with all his notes and some of his equipment, grew his hair long, and returned to alien territory to infiltrate. Felix was already undercover, already infiltrating the alien operation, and that's where it got tricky:

DEA knew Felix was really an agent; but they thought he was spying on the aliens for DEA—who were cooperating with the aliens in exchange for the promise of all drugs off the street.

In fact, Xavier Felix was a double-double agent, really working for the Resistance … unless he was a triple-double agent, or a double-double-double agent, in which case we were all sunk.

Don't aliens investgt horrible noise? I wrote. They allowed themselves to laugh out loud. At any point in the music discussion, a laugh fit like a corpse in potter's field.

Evidently, excessive noise was not a problem aliens cared much about.

Something was torquing me off. After wrestling with myself, I finally wrote it. How humans make zombie brew, help aliens evin infiltrating?!?! Renfrew stared, absently correcting something on my note. Don't know what. He looked wounded, in pain. Delib scrwng up recipe. Neurologic poison slow kills drives mad. Makes useless.

The captain bent over me and read along. He flipped his own sheet over and added: we're only hot chems. Others druggies cooks FDA that kind of crap. Everyone else seemed satisfied, so I dropped it. I was the only one, I guess, who spotted the Clue of the Horrible Admission: even if they were screwing up the brew so the zombies died or went mad—weren't they still turning humans into zombies in the first place?

How did they live with that?

We showed them more about the cybermummy.

They had the reaction of any scientist with a new toy. If there were a solution, they were going to bust humps finding it.

They took us into the basement, where the music from upstairs was merely loud, not ear-splitting. I was surprised a house in Riverside had one, especially this piece of crap. Then it hit me like a bony's fist: they probably dug it themselves. Whatever the case, we were in the hands of impressive dudes.

"You can talk quietly down here without fear of surveillance," Felix whispered.

"Hooray," said Arlene, but kept her voice low.

"Amen," said Albert.

We left Felix and Renfrew and went downstairs, where we rested a moment. I was so tired I felt like the marrow in my bones had turned to dust; or maybe I was having trouble breathing down there. Without intending to, I dozed off on a thick leather couch. When I came to, the others were unwrapping the mummy. It was embarrassing to have passed out like that.

"You okay, Fly?" Arlene asked over her shoulder. "Yeah, must have been tireder than I thought," I said. "Sorry about that."

"No problemo," said Arlene, yawning. "I'll take the next nap. You up to joining us?"

I nodded and moved in for a closer look. The cyberdude was the same as before, still a young black man turned into a computer-age pin cushion. Earlier, we removed enough bandages to see his face. We uncovered his head and saw it was completely shaved, the smooth dome covered in little metal knobs and dials.

As Albert and Arlene continued unwrapping, Jill took a step back. The man wasn't wearing anything but the quickly unwinding bandages. As they started unwrapping below the waist, our fourteen-year-old hellion got embarrassed. Oceans of gore she could take without batting an eyelash, but a nude young man was enough to make her blush.

I was deeply amused and grateful I woke up in time for the entertainment—Jill's reaction, I mean, not the guy. The more nonchalant she tried to be, the more fun I had watching. She actually turned fire-engine red, her normally pale cheeks matching her hair. I noticed Arlene noticing me noticing Jill. Ah, women!

“It’s nothing to get worked up about,” she told Jill. “Maybe Jill should leave the room,” suggested Albert.

“That’s her decision,” said Arlene.

“I don’t want to go back upstairs with the … chems,” she said. “At least we can talk down here.” “Don’t let them tease you, hon,” Arlene said. “Most everything you’re told about sex when you’re growing up is a lie anyway.”

“You mean what they’re told in school?” Albert asked slyly.

“I was thinking of the lies they hear at home,” said Arlene, instantly regretting the reference. We didn’t want Jill constantly fixating on the slaughter of Mom and Dad.

But the more serious tone affected Jill positively. She went back to the table and helped finish the unwrapping. She didn’t look south more than about five or six times. Seven, tops. Being a professional, I was trained to notice details like eye movements. “What time is it?” Arlene asked, yawning again.

She definitely deserved some sack time.

“Ask Fly,” said Jill, “he’s got the cl-cl-clock.” “Why didn’t they have our conference down here, where we could talk, instead of using the pads?” asked Arlene, I shrugged. “Aliens might think it was weird if ‘customers’ come over and the cooks disappear down into the basement with them.”

“Won’t they think it just as strange if the customers disappear alone?”

“Well, let’s hope not.”

I turned to Jill. “Earlier, you said you might be able to communicate with him on a computer, through one of those jacks. What’s the next step?” She went back to examining the body with the proper detachment. “Can you do it?” I asked. “Yes and no.”

“Care to explain?”

“Yes I can connect, if you get me the cables I need. One has to have a male Free-L-19, the other a male Free-L-20, both with a two-fiber mass-serial connector at the other end.”

I sure hoped somebody else knew what the hell that meant. “Where do you think we can get all that?” “Try upstairs; if they don’t have any, try Radio Shack or CompUSA.”

After writing down the kind of jacks required, I took the list upstairs and showed it to the chem guys. They didn't have what we needed, but the captain produced an Auto Club map and pointed out the nearest Radio Shack.

Kind of reassuring that L.A. still had its priorities.

Back in the basement, I asked who wanted to go.

And the result was predictable: "I'll go," said Jill. "Anyone but Jill," I said. "Maybe I should—" "Why can't I go?"

"I know there's not much to do in Riverside except shop," I admitted, "even before the demons came. But we've been through this already, Jill. We're still in the you're-not-expendable period."

"I'll go," said Albert.

"Fine," I said. "Now Arlene can get some sack—" "I'll go with him, Fly," said Arlene.

"But you were yawning only a moment before!"

"I'm not tired now," she said, real perky. I did what anyone in my position would do. I shrugged. If Arlene had surrender papers for me, I would have signed them on the spot.

29

Lately, I thought I was overdoing quotations from the Book. I'd never had so vivid a recollection for the Word until the world changed. I'd found time to read the scriptures once more in the new era, and now the words stayed with me, perhaps because the altered world made the tales of the Book seem more vivid.

The original Mormons were condemned not only for taking multiple wives, a behavior that might have been cause for sympathy instead of resentment. What upset other Americans of the nineteenth century was the claim that God would reveal a whole new history to newly chosen saints. The concept of Latter Day Saints was more offensive to the Christian majority of that time than any personal behavior or economic consequences.

My favorite Bible passage was John 21:25, the end of the Gospel According to Saint John, and it should have been the perfect shield against such prejudice; but most Christians pay little attention to the Word:

And there are also many other things which Jesus did, the which, if they should be written every one, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that should be written. Amen.

They liked those words just fine in theory; practice was something else again. The portions where the Book of Mormon disagrees with established Christian practices didn't help either. People got really upset when they were told they were not merely wrong, but diabolically wrong, on the subject of baptism. Hell. Arlene and I were about to go back into hell. We were trying to save living babies from burning in the hell on Earth. She was a good friend and comrade. I liked her a lot and hoped I would not witness her death. But since becoming bold about her sinful interest in me, she was making me uncomfortable. I would find her a lot easier to deal with if I weren't tempted by her.

Or if she would consent to… Jesus! Give me strength! Am I really ready to contemplate holy union? I grimaced; it was a very big step, a life commitment, and I was too chicken to think about it yet. I didn't feel much older than Jill!

My soul was troubled because I did desire Arlene. A verse from Nephi kept running through my mind, like a public service announcement:

O Lord, I have trusted in thee, and I will trust in thee forever. I will not put my trust in the arm of flesh; for I know that cursed is he that putteth his faith in the arm of flesh. Yea, cursed is he that putteth his trust in man or maketh flesh his arm.

"A buck for your thoughts," Arlene said, standing very close to me. We were taking our first rest stop in an alley. Lately, I was coming to feel safer in alleys than in open spaces.

"I was remembering a passage from the Book." "You want to share it with me?" she asked. I looked deep into her bloodshot eyes, the prettiest sight in the world, and there was no mockery or sarcasm. I wasn't about to tell her how hard I was trying to resist temptation and that right now I spelled sin beginning with a scarlet letter A.

But there was an earlier passage from the Second Book of Nephi that spoke directly to any warrior's heart. I quoted it instead:

"O Lord, wilt thou make way for mine escape before mine enemies! Wilt thou make my path straight before me! Wilt thou not place a stumbling block in my way—but that thou wouldst clear my way before me, a hedge not up my way, but the ways of mine enemy."

"Good plan," said Arlene.

"God's plan."

She touched my arm, and I felt relaxed instead of tense. "Albert, what if I told you I'd be willing to study your religion to see what it's about?" I wasn't expecting that. "Why would you do that?" I asked, probably too suspicious. In the Marines, I got too used to being sucker-punched by antireligious bigots.

"I'm not promising to convert or anything," she told me, "but I care about you, Albert. You believe in these things, and I want to understand." "Cool," I said; but I was still suspicious of her motives.

She dropped the other shoe: "So if I'm willing to study what you believe, would you be willing to relax a little and we could get together?"

I'd expected more subtlety from someone as intelligent as Arlene, but then again, Marines were not famous for an indirect approach. I had to close my eyes before shaking my head. I couldn't make the word no come out.

"I don't mean to make you uncomfortable," said Arlene.

“You may mean the best,” I told her, “but it doesn’t matter what we do or say. Unless we’re married, we can’t make love.”

“You mean we can’t even fool around?” she asked. “I mean we can’t have sex together unless we’re married.”

I could tell by her expression I was a more surprising phenomenon than the spidermind. “You’re kidding,” she said. “Not even touching?”

“Not sexual touching.” I wished she’d let up! She looked away from me, almost shyly. “I’m only talking about a little fun.”

I tried a new tack. “How can you think of fun when the world is dying?”

“Seems like a good time to me,” she said. “We could use a break.”

“Arlene, any sex outside of marriage is fornication, even just touching. That kind of touching. The sin is in the thought.”

She mumbled something. I could have sworn she asked, “How about inside marriage?” But she turned away and pretended she hadn’t spoken. I suppose Arlene was as freaked about the thought as I was. I didn’t think I was making the best possible case for my faith, but God isn’t about winning a popularity contest. He doesn’t have to.

“Albert, if you ever feel differently, I’ll be there for you.” I could tell she’d run out of things to say. At this moment, I probably seemed more alien than a steam-demon or a bony.

Fortunately, the rest break was over. I pointed to my watch and Arlene nodded. We could return to the far less dangerous territory of fighting monsters in hell. At least I knew what to expect from them. Nothing else stood between us and the Radio Shack except the corpses of some dead dogs. We broke into the abandoned store, kicking in the inadequately padlocked door. We used our day-night goggles to hunt through the darkness, not wanting to use a betraying light. A number of large spiderwebs were spun across a wall of boom boxes, proof that one Earth life form might survive the invasion unchanged. I was surprised that the store didn’t seem to have been looted … but then, what for? “We should be able to find the jacks for Jill,” said Arlene, who giggled right afterward. It took me a moment to recognize what was funny.

She was right, though. In the store’s unlooted condition, we found the jacks very quickly. She pocketed them and headed for the front of the store, but stopped at a counter. Something had caught her eye; I couldn’t see what.

“I need to ask you a question,” she said.

“Ask away.”

“Do you love someone?”

“That’s a very personal question.”

“That’s why I’m asking,” she followed up. “Do you?”

She deserved an answer. “Yes, but she’s dead.”

“You never made love to her?”

“She died before we married.”

“Thank you for telling me,” she said. “I’m not trying to probe you, Albert. I’ve succeeded in revealing too much of myself. Now let’s get back before I say something else stupid.”

She went out the door, and I glanced at the counter to see a demo music CD of Golden Oldies, led off by Carly Simon singing “Nobody Does it Better.” I’d never heard the song but I could imagine the subject matter. Jesus help us; was this a divine retribution? I shuddered; I hadn’t seen any rainbows since the invasion.

We didn’t exchange another word on the way back. Her expression was grim, hard. She was probably angry with herself for opening up to me without finding out first how I really felt. Nonreligious people usually had this trouble with us. We really meant it. No wonder we came off like nuts. How could I tell Arlene that she was probably allergic to nuts?

30

I let Jill take the next nap on the couch. For a crazy moment I envied the mummy for sleeping so long. Jill didn't seem all that rested when Arlene and Albert returned, but any sleep had to be better than none.

Jill asked if there was any coffee, and it turned out that the chems stored it in the basement. Hot-tap coffee helped bring her around, and with dark circles under her eyes and still yawning, she got to work on the man who was no longer a mummy but still plenty cyber.

She attached the necessary wires, brought up her ultramicro and started hacking. I still had my doubts that this would actually work; but the more excited Jill became, the more I was converted.

Then she said the magic words, "Yes, yes, yes!" and got up to pump her arm and strut like a guy. I doubt that sex will ever give her that much excitement. About a minute passed while she fiddled with the TracPad, listening to handshaking routines on the audio-out. She gave the first report: "I've made contact with his brain at seventeen thirty-two. His name is Kenneth Estes."

"Does he know where he is?" I asked.

Jill hesitated, and then spelled it out: "He thinks he's dead and in hell."

"Can we talk to him?" I asked.

"Yup," said Jill. "I can type questions, and you can read his answers. But you have to scan through the random crap; it's a direct link to Ken's brain." "All right, you interpret," I replied. "The first thing is find out who he is and why he's important enough for demon gift-wrapping."

Arlene sat up on the couch where she'd almost dozed off. This could well be too interesting to miss. Albert sat in a chair, but he was wide-awake. Jill tapped for a long moment at her tiny keyboard, using all ten fingers, much to my surprise. I thought all hackers were two-finger typists, it was a law or something. She read the first part of the man's story:

“As I said, his name’s Ken Estes. He’s a computer software designer slumming as a CIA analyst. Low-level stuff, not a field agent or anything. He was born in—“ “No time for the family background,” I interrupted. “Keep him focused on how and why he became a cybermummy.”

Somewhere, water was dripping. I hadn’t noticed it before, but it was very annoying while waiting for Jill to pass on the messages in silence. Finally, she spoke again: “When the aliens landed and started the war, Ken was told by his superiors that the agency had developed a new computer which the operator accessed in V.R. mode.”

“What’s V.R.?” Albert asked.

“Old term; this guy’s in his thirties! Virtual Reality; we call it burfing now, from ‘body surfing,’ I think.” “Oh, the net,” said Albert.

“We’ll go back to school later,” I jumped in. “Get on with it, Jill!”

“High-ranking officers within the agency induced Ken to accept the implants ‘for the good of the United States.’ Told him he’d be able to help fight the aliens. Instead, it turned out they were traitors within the Company—“ Jill stopped for a moment, swallowing hard. She took another sip of coffee before continuing. We were back to her deep disgust for human traitors. She made herself read on. She wouldn’t be guilty of dereliction of duty.

The high-ranking officers had cooperated with the aliens, joining a criminal conspiracy against the country they were sworn to defend—and incidentally, against their own species. Ken “told” us more through Jill: Company ‘borged me, attached me to alien net, one not part conspiracy waited too long, tried to save killed conspiratora-tora-tora befora took him out…

“How did the aliens intend to use him?” I asked. Jill asked, and the answer came: Hoped him conduit betwalien biotechputer netputer and webwide human d’bases crlsystems.

“Jeez, it’s like a sci-fi James Joyce,” I said. “From now on, you interpret, Jill. It gives me a headache!” “We live in a science fiction world,” said Arlene, wandering over from the couch, wide-awake, as Ken’s tale unfolded. “Fly, I’d like to ask a question,” she said.

“Be my guest.”

“Jill, would you ask him how much of the alien technology was biologically based?”

Jill asked and passed on: “Ken says that all the alien technology is biotech, except for stuff they stole from subject races, like the rocket technology for the flying skulls.”

“Yes!” exclaimed Arlene, as excited as Jill at a moment of vindication. “We’ve been on the right track all along, Fly. The original enemy went as far with biological techniques as they possibly could. Perhaps the first species they conquered lived on the same planet, but had a mechanical technology they were able to adapt to their own use. Eventually, they conquered the Gate builders; we monkeyed with the Gates, turned them on, and the invaders poured through. That would explain why in any choice between organic and mechanical, they always opt for the biological.”

“And it would also explain why our own technology shows up in odd places,” I agreed, “and why they use firearms.”

“They’re pragmatic,” said Albert. “Their study of us proves that, these demonic forms they take.” I tried to get the show back on the road: “Jill, can he tell us how they communicate with one another?” There was a long stretch before Jill helped us out with our immediate communication needs. “He says it hurts to think about this, but he will. He … realizes we’re free. I’ve told him a little about us and … he does want to help.”

“Tell him we appreciate anything he can do,” I said. Another moment passed and he answered the question beyond my expectation: “There are neural path-ways integrated into the computers. Psi-connections carry all the orders. The aliens don’t need to tell their slaves what to do! They merely think the orders, but it’s different than merely thinking. No word. Project? Psimulcast?”

“Does Ken know where the commands originate?”

I asked.

“He doesn’t understand the question,” Jill answered quickly.

“Uh, I’m not asking if he knows where the ultimate leaders happen to be right now. But does he know how the chain of command functions for the invasion?”

Jill’s forehead showed some extra furrows as she passed on my thoughts, probably doing some translating along the way. Finally, Ken passed on a detailed report, filtered through Jill.

“Question is meaningless; no hierarchy.”

“Hive culture? Collective?”

“Nope; they just. .. huh? Uh, they just all do the same thing. The aliens themselves; the slaves—I think that means everyone not part of ‘the people’—fight like crazy. That’s why they’re not ‘the people.’” “Can Ken issue commands?”

“Fly, that’s what he was made for! Receive alien commands and convey them to human systems.” “I mean, the other way ‘round?”

She tapped, stared. “He doesn’t understand the question. It’s like he’s not allowed to think about it or see the question. Some sort of protected-mode thing firm-wired in. Wait, he’s talking again . .. “This ‘invasion fleet’ is actually an exploration fleet. Highest-intel aliens are the entities inside the spiderminds. Send out fleets, probe, when feasible conquer alien worlds, no reason other than raw power. Well, Ken can’t understand the reason, if there is one.

“Slave masters with an expanding empire, but more interested in finding new genetic material to absorb into their web-of-life—which is how they think of it—than they are in having new individual slaves … especially short-lived, contentious slaves.” Jill stopped talking and took off the headphones, rubbing a hand across her forehead. “Are you all right?” asked Arlene.

“Little headache. I’ll be all right,” she said.

“You need to stop?” I asked.

“No. Hey, I just had a brainstorm! If we could get Ken jacked into one of the alien terminals and override the safeties, we could sabotage their net!” “Brilliant idea,” I said. “Why didn’t I think of that?” I winked. “Maybe we could sabotage their entire technology base.”

“There’s a problem. When he’s connected to the net, there are built-ins that override his human volition. The monitor can’t take over the CPU.” “It can if it has its own chip set and special programming,” muttered Arlene.

“The program that shuts off his brain must have a ‘front end’ somewhere in his brain,” Jill said—to herself, I presumed. “If I can find it, I can disable it, or I’m not Jill Hoerchner.”

“Are you?” asked my pal.

Jill glanced over at her and added, “I’d need a quiet place where I can be undisturbed for several days. Days, not hours.”

There were several hundred questions I wanted to ask Ken; but we heard a loud noise from upstairs. It didn't sound like more of the headbanger music. It sounded like heavy feet thumping around upstairs. Maybe it was aliens coming to pick up their supply of zombie brew.

I was pissed that the chems hadn't warned us when these "guests" would pay them a visit; then I realized that the aliens wouldn't stick to any kind of set program. All the more reason for the captain and the doctor to maintain their act.

Very quietly, Arlene flicked off the one light in the basement ceiling. We sat in the dark. We heard raised voices; the chems were denying that they'd seen a human "strike team" or a human wrapped in bandages.

I heard the telltale hiss of imp talk; I held my breath … there were a lot of feet tramping around up there. A new kind of voice spoke next, a grating, metallic monotone. It sounded like a robot from an old sci-fi movie, or something speaking through a vocoder. Once this voice entered the conversation, our human allies sounded frantic. I had a bad feeling about this. Good agents would put on a believable act. Good agents would stick to the part, right to the point of death. But were they?

The next sound we heard was all too familiar: a powerful explosion shook the house, followed by the smell of fire from above. Before we could even think about acting, there was another explosion, and now smoke began to drift down the wooden steps to our hiding place.

We listened to the alien storm troopers start tearing the place apart. They'd convinced me of their sincerity in trying to find us. I huddled the others and said:

"The bastards will find the basement. Our only hope is if the cooks dug an escape tunnel, one that exits from here."

Keeping the light off didn't make it any easier, but I hadn't noticed a tunnel when we could see. If my pipe dream produced a real pipe, the opening would be hidden anyway. We rummaged through spare equipment, desperately trying not to make noise. The stuff was mainly metal, so the process wasn't easy. The chems had stored their chemical stuff in the basement. Tanks of volatiles, glassware, a fire extinguisher, jars and jars of chemicals (and I was grateful the glass was thick). There were plenty of shelves and books. And nowhere behind any of this did we find a secret opening.

We hunted the walls, shaking bookcases that might be doors, checking fireplaces for hidden holes, anything at all! I was about to give up when my hands came to rest on a bookcase that seemed bolted down, unlike the others.

I started tugging on various books to see if one of them was a trigger mechanism. Two things happened simultaneously. First, I found a book that wouldn't move. Never had I been happier to find something stuck.

Second, with a triumphant howling, the imps found the trapdoor and flung it wide, letting light pour into the basement.

We froze; I was a statue holding up the bookshelf;

Albert stood nearby, holding the naked Ken in a fireman's carry; Jill was part of that tableau, holding her CompMac ultramicro, still jacked into Ken; and Arlene was on the other side of the basement room, in the gloom. Of the five of us, Ken did the best job of playing dead, but he had an unfair advantage. A thing dropped down the open trap.

This baby looked vaguely humanoid—oh, they were keeping at it—but definitely alien. The yellow-white, naked body maintained the hell motif so popular with the invaders. No obvious genitalia. The arms and legs were unusually small and thin. The most outstanding feature was the way the skin rippled like bubbling marshmallows over an open fire. I wondered if this might be one of their enslaved races. As it came closer, it dawned on me why the spindly limbs were irrelevant to its effectiveness in battle. The new monster was hot. I mean, fires-of-hell-make-your-eyeballs-pop hot. No wonder the skin rippled from the amazing heat. He was like a mirage in the desert made into burning sulfur-flesh, the most "hell-ish" creature yet.

There were books on the shelf right next to it. They burst into flame from his proximity, lighting the room, and the wood of the shelf charred right before our eyes. Maybe it was an optical illusion, but it appeared that actual flames danced along the thing's skin. The little voice in the back of my head started shrieking: Saved the best for last! The trouble with the little voice was that it was so damned optimistic. As the living torch moved closer, I saw its eyes weren't really eyes—more like a ring of flaming dots so bright that it hurt to look at them. I wondered how we might appear to this creature; I also wished I had a barrel of ice water to throw on the uninvited guest. The others were as confused as their fearless leader.

Arlene was able to fire off a short burst from her AB-10. The thing didn't even react, but Arlene's machine pistol became so hot she had to drop it. Then the fire-thing moved between the others and Yours Truly, focusing on me.

Having cut me off, the monster put on a little magic act. It was so bright, I couldn't turn away, no matter how painful… and I watched its body actually contract, becoming brighter as it squeezed together—like it was about to explode.

Training took over, the healthy respect we were taught for all kinds of explosives. I had no desire to become Marine flambe.

I dove to the side, screaming inarticulately; everyone got the idea, falling flat, trying to cover himself. Fireboy exploded, a blast lancing out and disintegrating the bookshelf where I had stood a moment before. Albert threw himself over Ken's body, then left Ken on the floor and grabbed his Uzi clone. We had all the light we could use.

The big Mormon opened fire. The big gun actually sounded soft compared to the horrific explosion from the alien, but the result was the same as with Arlene. Did the thing generate a heat field around its immediate body surface, heat so intense that bullets dissolved before getting through?

One good plan was growing in my head: run away! This was a much better plan than it sounded. Rising shakily to my feet, I could see quite clearly the tunnel we'd been trying to find. The shelf I'd been exploring had indeed covered the exit, and the explosion had done a superb job of open sesame. I considered how to rescue the others, or at least Jill and Ken. The mission wasn't a burnout case yet.

For some reason, the fire monster seemed to have a thing for me; it targeted me again. I recognized the telltale signs. Looking right at me (if those black dots counted for eyes), it began to contract, powering up for another burst.

Before I ended my career as a piece of toast, Arlene came to the rescue. She got right behind the monster and opened fire from behind. Having learned her lesson about wasting bullets on this guy, she used the fire extinguisher.

Never discourage initiative, that's my motto! She sprayed the thing, snarling, "Goddamned fire-eater!" It was the best name she'd invented in quite a while.

The monster screamed. The fire extinguisher was actually extinguishing the fire! This suggested a whole new approach to dealing with the monsters: properly labeled household appliances could restore Heaven on Earth.

Arlene kept pouring the foam on the fire-eater, who was making a sound somewhere between a screeching cat and sizzling bacon. If the Marine Corps were around after we'd saved the world, I'd recommend a special medal for Arlene as master of unconventional weaponry: first the chainsaw, now the safety equipment.

I have the highest possible regard for women who save my life.

“Move out!” I bellowed to one and all, issuing one of my favorite orders. Everyone liked the idea just fine. Except for one imp, that is, without the brains to avoid tough Marines who had just stopped a monster compared to which an imp isn’t fit to light cigars. Imps aren’t generally all that bright, of course, so I don’t know why I was surprised. The ugly little sucker dropped through the hole and threw a flaming wad of snot that I refused to take seriously. On the other hand, one of those wads cashed the chips of Bill Ritch. The thought made me doubly mad, so … I returned fire with my double-barreled, thinking how I actually preferred an honest, all-American duck gun like this one to the fascist, pump-action variety. Yeah! The imp split down the middle, the guts making a Rorschach test. Better than a riot gun, no question about it.

We hauled ass down the tunnel as I ran our list of liabilities. There was only one, actually, but it was big. If we’d gotten the shelf open and closed behind us, we’d have a decent chance right now. However, all the monsters in the world knew where we’d gone, and the hordes would be hot on our heels.

Reinforcing this idea was the hissing, growling, slithering, wheezing, roaring, shlumping, and thud-thud-thudding a few hundred meters behind us. There was nothing to do but run like thieves in the night.

Arlene brought the fire extinguisher with her; God knows why, unless we ran into another of our brand-new playmates. Albert and Jill were strapped, so their hands were free to carry Ken. Poor Ken. The way he was getting knocked around, bruised, and cut, he would have been doing a lot better if the bandages had been left on. If we got out of this, I promised to buy him a whole new body bandage.

The tunnel, winding snakelike, was terribly narrow, lined with raw earth and occasionally propped with wooden braces. The little voice in the back of my head insisted we were perfectly all right, so long as the passage wasn’t blocked. This was the same voice that always told me to leave the umbrella home right before the heaviest rainfall of the year. Now, it’s not like we hit a real cave-in. If we had, we’d simply have died right there. But a partial cave-in we could deal with.

Albert threw his massive frame at the wall of dirt, and it shifted. We were slowed down by Jill and Arlene pushing Ken through, while Albert yanked from the other side. I guarded the rear with the shotgun loaded, ready for bear. No bears. A few feet ahead, we hit the outside of a huge pipe and found a hole buzz-cut right through it. We opened it, and I wished I’d left my olfactory senses back on Mars.

“Ew!” said Jill, another unsolicited but insightful commentary.

Sewer main. We were assailed by the odor of methane.

“Dive in, the offal’s fine!” said Arlene cheerfully. The sound of our pursuers only fifty meters back made the idea a lot more appealing. We could hear their raspy breathing.

We ducked into the sewers, very careful that Ken shouldn’t accidentally drown. We’d come this far together, and he was starting to feel like a member of the family.

As we ran we heard the last sound anyone wants to hear underground: the roar and whoosh of a rocket. I crashed into the others, making Albert drop Ken. Something heavy, smelling of burnt copper, whizzed over our heads; a nasty little rocket that just started to curve, heat-seeking, but couldn’t quite make the turn. It blew a hole in the pipe instead.

And I’d thought the tunnel smelled bad before! I shook the dust out of my eyes and coughed, then lifted Jill from the ground. Tears were pouring down her face, but she wasn’t crying; my eyes were watering too. Albert jerked Arlene to her feet, and they both checked on Ken, who was lying facedown with a pile of dirt on his head.

Jill opened his mouth, shoveled the dirt out, and made sure he hadn’t swallowed his tongue. He coughed, and Jill got to her feet, handing Ken off like a sack of wheat. I loved watching a fourteen-year-old do what was considered criminal in the previous world: act like an adult.

“Over here,” yelled Albert, pointing to a small hatch leading to a cramped corridor. The monsters were big; they’d have a hard time following. Albert went first, probably not a good idea. I preferred Jill and Arlene in front. If we were ambushed from behind, the girls might still get through, and Albert and I could hold off the Bad Guys; the mission would go on.

But it was too late to do anything about it now. At least we knew that anywhere Albert went, the rest of us could easily follow. I brought up the rear, hanging back to delay, if necessary.

The corridor walls were lined with pipes. When I caught up with the others, they were trying to open a pressure hatch at the far end. I brought bad luck with me—the sound of another rocket.

Albert and I dived left, Arlene and Jill right, taking Ken with them. Our actions confused the heat-seeker: it turned partially starboard, exploding and rupturing several pipes. Again we had the fun of choking and gagging on a huge burst of methane.

Albert grunted as he turned the difficult pressure hatch; we heard the gratifying sound of metal grinding against metal. He didn’t open the portal a moment too soon.

Looking back, I saw imps, zombies, and one bony. That answered the question of who'd been firing rockets. Bringing up their rear was either another fire-eater or the one Arlene had sprayed with the foam. If the latter, he'd be looking for payback. Arlene stepped up, fire extinguisher pointed, ready for round two. I suddenly remembered something from my raucous high school daze. "No!" I shouted. "Get back! Get through the hatch right now!"

She got.

Coming out last, I slammed the hatch shut and spun the wheel. "That's not going to last," said Albert.

"Won't need to," I said, backing away. "Everybody, get way back!"

Albert's face was a mask of puzzlement; then it dawned on him what was about to happen. "Hope you all really like barbecue," I addressed the troops. "Hey, Arlene. Remember when they built the L.A. subway?"

"Yeah …" she said, scowling, still confused. The mother of all gas explosions rocked us off our feet, blowing the hatch clean off its hinges; the flying metal could have killed any of us in the path. 1 staggered to my feet. It didn't take a lot of nerve to go over and check on the results; just a strong stomach. Nothing survived that explosion, not even the fire-eater.

As I peered into the maw of hell, I saw nothing left of the alien pursuers except shreds of flesh and a fine mist of alien blood. And of course the lingering odor of sour lemons.

"What happened?" asked Jill, stunned. At least, I assume that's what she asked; all I could hear was a long, loud alarm bell.

I'd counted on the fire-eater; thankfully, it was hot enough to set off the methane.

Jill was completely recovered from being stunned. She jumped up and down and shouted something, probably some contemporary equivalent of yowza. We old folk were still a little shell-shocked as we continued along the sewer. After several twists and turns, it dawned on us we were lost.

Arlene had a compass, and now was the time to use it. "We've got a problem," she said; I was just starting to be able to hear again. "It shows a different direction every time."

"Electric current in the pipe switches," I said.

“Take averages, figure out a rough west.” No matter where we were and what was happening, the watchwords must be “Go west, go west.” We’d find the computer in L.A., so the President had told us; hope he knew what he was talking about. There, we guaranteed a reckoning the enemy would long remember.

31

We continued westward until we finally emerged several klicks from where we'd entered.

Night was falling again. We'd had a busy day. "Transportation," Albert pointed out. We beheld an old Lincoln Continental, covered in some kind of crud halfway between rust and slime, making it impossible to determine its original color. It probably had an automatic transmission; the mere thought made me shudder.

Albert went over and opened the unlocked door. There was no key. "I'll bet it still runs," he said, lying down on the seat so he could look up at the steering column. He did violence to the crappy housing and started fiddling with the wires. A moment later the engine coughed into life.

"You hot-wired the car," said Jill, impressed.

"Sure," he said.

"I'm surprised you'd know how to do that," she said.

"Why?" he asked, getting out of the dinosaur. "Was that part of sniper training?" Jill wanted to know.

"Part of my troubled youth."

"I wish more Mormons were like you," she told him.

"The Church was good for me, Jill," he told her. "It turned my life around."

"Which way were you facing?" she asked jokingly.

"Toward hell," he said.

"You're still facing that way," observed Arlene, "every time you take a step."

"Yes," he agreed, "but now I'm able to fight it. I'd rather blast a demon than give him my soul." We'd had this conversation before. I preferred opting out this time. Arlene didn't mind a dose of deja vu, apparently, but then, she was sweet on the guy. "They're aliens," she said.

“Sure,” he agreed. “But for me, they’re demons too.”

One man’s image of terror is another man’s joy ride. Speaking of which, the old Lincoln was enough of a monster for me. I was half sorry it still ran. A quick look at the gas gauge told the story: half a tank, plenty to make it to Los Angeles.

One thing about an old family car: there was plenty of room for our family, including Ken propped up between Jill and Arlene in the backseat. I was happy to let Albert drive. I rode shotgun.

Albert flipped on the lights in the twilight and triumphantly announced, “They work!”

“Great,” I said. “Now turn them off.”

“Oh, right,” he said like a little boy caught playing with the wrong toy. We drove along without lights, heading toward the diminished glow of Ellay. “Do you have a new plan?” Arlene asked. Glancing in the rearview mirror, I saw that Jill was sleeping. “Of course,” I said. “Always. I think we should hijack a plane, elude any pursuit—“ “Yeah,” Albert interrupted. “I wonder if they have any aircraft? I haven’t seen any.”

“Maybe they’re using zombie pilots,” Arlene commented hopefully. Zombie pilots would not have fast reflexes.

“So, as I was saying,” I continued, “we take our plane and hot-tail it to Hawaii. There we find the War Technology Center and take them Ken. With help from Jill, we plug Ken into the bionet and crash the whole, friggin’ alien system.”

“Good plan,” said Albert.

“Ditto,” said Arlene.

It was good to be appreciated. With a proper respect for Yours Truly, I might yet help Arlene to find God. I was certain that Albert wouldn’t mind that. “Wonder if there’ll be monsters at the city limits,” said Albert at length.

“Don’t see why they’d have that much organization,” I answered, “after what we’ve seen. What do you think, Arlene?” I asked, glancing into the rear-view mirror again. She’d joined Jill in the Land of Nod. Given the condition of Ken Estes, the backseat had become the sleeping compartment of this particular train.

“The girls are taking forty,” commented Albert with a touch of envy.

“How are you holding up?” I asked.

“Driving in the dark without lights keeps the old adrenaline flowing.”

“I know what you mean. But if you can use some relief, I’ll spell you.”

He risked taking his eyes off the black spread of road long enough to glance over. “You’re all right, Fly. I see why Arlene respects you so much.” “She’s told you that?”

“Not in so many words. But it’s an easy tell.” We both tried to discern something of the road. The horizon was bright, in contrast to the darkness right in front of us. It was that time of day. I rubbed my eyes, suddenly starting to lose it.

“Why don’t you take a nap?” he suggested. “No. Should at least be two of us awake, and I want to make sure you’re one of them.”

“Right.”

Exhausted but too wired to sleep, we made it into Los Angeles at night. We didn’t run into any monster patrols on the way. Maybe they were saving up some real doozies for us at the Beverly Center. At the outskirts of the city, zombie guards shuffled back and forth in a caricature of military discipline. Even a zombie would have noticed our approach if we’d had the headlights on. Score one for basic procedure.

Albert took a side road, but we ran into the same problem. “How long do I keep this up?” he asked. “All night, I’d say, if I hadn’t prepared for this.”

“How?”

“I didn’t throw out the lemons we didn’t get around to using before. I wrapped them in plastic wrap from the MREs. We still have them with us.”

“To borrow from Jill, ick!” he said. “Who’s been carting around that rotting crap?”

“You, Bubba!”

“Just for that, Fly, you get to wake the girls.” The man knew a thing or two about revenge.

We parked and I woke up Jill first. Then I let Jill risk tapping Arlene on the shoulder. Some tough Marines you wake with kid gloves—or better yet, with a kid. Arlene came to with a start, but she was good. Very good.

The night air felt pleasantly cool. As we spoiled it with spoiled citrus, Jill asked, "What about Ken?" "Lime and lemon him too," said Arlene. "We've all got to be the same to the zombie noses." "So, walk or ride?" asked Albert.

"Don't see any reason to give up these wheels before we have to," I said, amazing myself, considering how I regarded the old Lincoln. "With the windows down, we ought to pass."

"I look dead enough to keep driving," said Albert. We all piled back in, thought rancid, graveyard thoughts, and rolled.

As we approached the first zombie checkpoint, I started worrying. There hadn't been any other cars around. But we'd seen a fleet of trucks with zombie drivers back in Buckeye. I'd have felt a lot better if we weren't the only car.

Suddenly we were rammed from behind. A truck had hit us. It didn't have lights. One good view in the side mirror revealed a zombie driver. "Don't react," I hissed to everyone, fearing a volley of gunfire at the wrong moment. Everyone kept his cool.

"We weren't hit very hard," I said. The truck was barely tooling along, at about the same slow approach speed we were doing. "Everyone all right?" I asked quietly.

While I received affirmatives, the zombie driver demonstrated some ancient, primitive nerve impulse that had survived from the human days of Los Angeles. The fughead leaned on his horn. All of a sudden, I completely relaxed. Getting past the checkpoint was going to be a cinch.

"Shall I take us in, Corporal?" asked Albert, obviously on the same wavelength.

"Hit it, brother," I said.

The truck stuck close to our bumper through the totally porous checkpoint. After that, we just drove in typical L.A. style, weaving drunkenly between zombie-driven trucks, leaning on our horn, all the time heading for the ever popular LAX. I wanted to give the airport the biggest laxative it had ever had with Lemon Marine Suppositories. Cleans out those unsightly monsters every time!

32

We dumped the car in one of the overcrowded LAX parking lots. Lot C, in fact. There was real joy in not worrying about finding a parking place, and an even greater pleasure in not worrying about remembering it.

We only had to hop a single fence to get where we were going, in the time-honored tradition of hijackers, and Ken didn't weigh very much. A thought crossed my mind. "So, uh, one of us knows how to fly a plane, right?"

"Better than flying it wrong," Arlene said. "No time for jarhead humor," I said. "Gimmie an answer."

"Funny," said Arlene, quite seriously, "but I was about to ask the same question. Really." We both looked at Albert. "I'd been planning to take lessons, but I never got around to it," he admitted sadly.

"How hard can it be?" I asked, recalling the words of an old movie character.

We infiltrated the refueling area for the big jets, and I found the perfect candidate: an ancient C-5 Air Force transport, which could easily make it all the way to Hawaii. Assuming somebody could drive it. Everyone was already doing a good zombie performance, although I still thought Jill was overdoing it. Ken was propped between Albert and me, and we were able to make it look like he was stumbling along with us. We prepared to tramp up the ramp, joining a herd of other zombies.

A pair of Clydes waited at the entrance. Damn the luck! We could pass for zombies among zombies, but I wasn't at ail sure about these guys, They were disarming each zombie as it entered the plane. It was a perfectly reasonable precaution, considering how zombies acted in close quarters when they were jostled, pushed, pulled … or damn near anything else. I couldn't blame the Clydes for not wanting the plane to be suddenly depressurized, but the idea of being disarmed was not at all appealing. We did some shifting around, then hit the ramp with myself in the lead, the other four right behind me, four abreast with Jill and Ken on the inside. Jill did as good a job as I had of keeping Ken's end up. This makeshift plan could work if the Clydes were bored.

Sure enough, they barely paid attention as we simply took our heavy artillery and tossed them on the pile outside the plane. Bye-bye, shotgun. This left us with nothing but the pistols hidden inside our jackets.

We stuck close to each other, lost in the zombie mob, as the plane started to taxi; then we worked our way up front. The Clydes were in the back, huddled and talking about something. By the time the plane lifted off, giving me that rush I always get from takeoff, we were close enough to the front that we could duck behind the curtain leading to the cockpit door. I took it on myself to give it a gentle push. The door opened inward, revealing a pair of imps hovering over a strange globe, another product of alien technology, bolted to the floor. The monsters appeared to be driving the plane through the use of this pulsing, humming, buzzing ball. It gave me a headache just looking at it; biotech made me need a Pepto-Bismol. The glistening, sweating device was connected to the instrument panel.

The imps' backs were to us. They were so preoccupied with their task, they didn't even turn around when we entered. I closed the door quietly and locked it.

From the cockpit I saw Venus … we were going the wrong way, due east!

This simply would not do. I pointed at the imps, and then at Arlene. She nodded. We stepped forward, pistols in hand, and the barrels of our guns touched the back of imp heads at exactly the same instant. The little voice in the back of my head chose that instant to open its fat yap and suggest that Arlene and I should say something to the imps, on the order of, "We're hijacking this plane to Hawaii. We never did have a proper honeymoon!"

But there was no way to give an imp orders, other than Fall down, you're dead! We'd simply take over the plane. After we killed the imps.

I'm certain that Arlene and I fired at the same moment. The idle thoughts passing through my mind couldn't have affected the results.

But something went wrong.

The imp Arlene tapped went down and stayed down. She put two more bullets in him, almost by reflex, to make certain that the job was good and done. I should have been able to take care of one lousy imp, after the way we'd exterminated ridiculous numbers of zombies, demons, ghosts, and pumpkins. One lousy imp! At the closest possible range! The head turned ever so slightly as I squeezed the trigger. Somehow the bullet went in at an angle that didn't put the imp down.

Turning around, screaming, it flung one flaming snotball. One lousy snotball. I dived to the left. Arlene was already out of the line of fire, on the right, taking care of the other one. Jill crouched, fingers stuck in her ears, trying to keep out the loud reverberations of the shots in the enclosed space. Albert could have done the same.

But Albert froze. As much of a pro as he was, he stood there with the dumb expression of a deer caught in the headlights, right before road kill. Maybe Albert had a little voice in the back of his head, and it had chosen that moment to bug him. Or maybe it was such a foregone conclusion that these imps were toast, he'd let down his guard, taking a brief mental rest at precisely the wrong moment.

The fireball struck him dead-center in the face.

I remembered losing Bill Ritch that way. It didn't seem right to survive all the firepower this side of the goddamned sun, and then cash in on something so trivial. It made me so mad, the cockpit vanished in a haze of red. It was like I'd mainlined another dose of that epinephrine stuff from Deimos. I dropped my gun and jumped on the imp, beating at it with my fists, tearing at it with my teeth. I was screaming louder than poor Albert, writhing on the floor holding his face.

Hands were on me from behind, trying to pull me off, little hands. Jill was behind me, yelling something in my ear I couldn't understand; but the part of me that didn't want to hurt Jill won out over the part that wanted to rip the imp apart with my fingernails. Letting go seemed a bad idea, though; there'd be nothing stopping it from tossing the fireballs to fry us all. Then I heard Arlene shouting something about a "clear shot," and I suddenly remembered the invention of firearms.

The caveman jumped out of the way to give Cockpit Annie the target she wanted. She pumped round after round into the imp's open mouth. He never closed it. He never raised his claw hands again.

Of course, while we were encountering these difficulties, there was a commotion outside. I guess we had made a bit of noise.

One of the zombies tried the door. The lock held for now. Sanity returned, and I helped the blinded Albert get up, casually noticing that he hadn't taken any of the flaming stuff down his throat or nose. He might live.

In the distance we heard gunshots and curses. The Clydes must have been forcing their way forward, shooting any zombies in their way. Suddenly, I was grateful that the plane was a sardine can of solid, reworked flesh.

"Okay, moment of truth," said Arlene, the mantle of command falling on her there and then. It's not something I'd wish on my worst enemy. "Who's going to fly this damned thing?" she asked in the tones of a demand, not a question.

The gunshots crept close. We had perhaps a minute. “I will,” said Jill in a small voice; but with confidence. I remembered her stint in the truck with some trepidation. Then I remembered how she stayed behind the wheel after a missile tried to take her head off.

“You didn’t tell us you could fly one of these,” I said, getting my voice back.

“You didn’t ask,” she said. It sounded like one of those old comedy routines, but without a laugh track. It wasn’t funny.

“Jill,” I said, “have you ever flown a plane before?”

“Kind of.”

“Kind of? What the hell does that mean?” A zombie threw itself against the door, where Albert still moaned. He braced himself, still fighting, still a part of the team.

She sighed. “Okay, I haven’t really flown; but I’m a wizard at all the different flight simulators!” Arlene and I stared at each other with mounting horror. I hated to admit it, even to myself, but my experience bringing down the mail rocket—with a high-tech program helping every mile of the way—probably qualified me less to fly the C-5 than Jill with her simulators.

“All right?” I said to Arlene.

“Right,” she answered, shrugging, then went to hook up Ken.

I helped Jill look for jacks on the glistening biotech. She was more willing to touch it than I was. She found what she needed and plugged Ken into the system. The operation went smoothly; he’d been designed for the purpose.

Jill called up SimFlight on her CompMac and tapped furiously, connecting it to Ken, then to the actual plane. A moment later she spoke with that triumphant tone of voice that rarely let us down:

“Got it! We have control!”

The gunshots suggested the Clydes were getting closer, and more heavy bodies were beginning to throw themselves against the cockpit door. I was about to make a suggestion when Albert beat me to it. He was down but not out.

“Godspeed,” whispered Albert, still covering his eyes. “Now, why don’t you purge all the air from the cabin, daughter?”

Raising my eyebrows, I silently mouthed “daughter” to Arlene, but she shook her head. Albert obviously meant it generically. He was much too young to be her real father.

Faster and faster, Jill typed away … then the raging, surging sounds behind the door grew dimmer and dimmer, finally fading away to nothing. Modern death by keyboard. We were already at forty thousand feet and climbing; up there, there was too little air to sustain even zombies. And Clydes, human-real or human-fake, had a human need for plenty of O2. “Well done, daughter,” said Albert. He could hear just fine.

Having come this close to buying it, I could hardly believe we were safe again. A coughing fit came out of nowhere and grabbed my heart. Arlene put her arm around me and said, “Your turn to sleep again.” I didn’t argue. I noticed that Albert was already snoozing.

Sleep that knits up the raveled sleave of care . , . I felt too lousy, and too guilty somehow, to stay under for long. Less than a half hour later I was awake again. Jill had turned around, crossed the coastline, and was over the ocean. All was well with the world … for a few seconds longer.

“Holy hell, we’re losing airspeed!” she suddenly screamed, jerking us all awake. “We’re losing altitude!”

It’s always something.

The engines strained and whined, making the noises they would if headed into a ferocious head wind. But there was no wind. With a big fooooomp, one engine flamed out. Jill wasn’t kidding about the quality of her simulator exercises; she instantly dived the plane to restart it. Then she headed back, circling around to try again.

“Stupid monster mechanics,” I yelled. “Dumb-ass demon dildo ground crew! How the hell do these idiots intend to conquer the world when they can’t even—“ “Shut up!” Jill shouted. I shut up. She was right. I could be pissed off all I wanted after she saved our collective ass.

Two more tries and she was white-faced. “It’s some kind of field,” she said. “We can’t go west.” “So that’s how they’re conquering the world,” said Arlene calmly. I took my medicine like a good boy.

33

Jill set the auto-pilot to continue circling, hoping no one had noticed the deviation yet. She typed away, accessing the biotech nav-com aboard. Then she smiled grimly. “Listen up,” she said. We sure as hell did; the mantle of command was hers while we were in the air. “Guys, we’re going to have to dump you off at Burbank.” She said it like Dante’s Ninth Circle of Hell where the devil himself is imprisoned in ice, spending eternity chewing on Judas like a piece of tough caramel. I’d made good grades in my lit. courses.

“What? Why?” demanded Arlene.

“The force-field switch is located in the old Disney tower, near the studio.”

“Is nothing sacred to these devils?” I asked. “Night on Bald Mountain,” said Arlene, “part deux.”

“Sorry. No choice.”

Jill altered course and headed northeast. We didn’t speak for the rest of the short flight. None of us could think of anything worth saying.

Finally, Jill was bringing the plane low over Burbank International Airport. “Can you do a rolling stop?” I asked. “Slow down to about fifty kilometers per hour, then turn it into a touch-and-go?” “Uh,” she said. After thinking about it, she continued: “Yeah. Why?” I let the silence speak for me. She gasped and said, “You’re crazy if you’re thinking of a roll-out!”

“I’m thinking of a roll-out.”

“What the hell,” said Arlene. “I’m crazy too.” Jill shook her head, obviously wondering about both of us.

She cruised in over the airport, ignoring the standard landing pattern and dodging other planes, which answered my question about lousy zombie pilots. We were low enough that the passenger cabin was pressurized again. Arlene and I went aft, picking our way over a planeful of zombies and two Clydes that were examples of the only good monsters. Jill kept calling out, “Are you ready?” She sounded more nervous each time. We reassured her. It was easier than reassuring ourselves.

“Open the rear cargo door!” Arlene shouted so that Jill could hear. We hit the runway deck hard, bouncing twice; the C-5 wasn’t supposed to fly this slow. The rushing wind made everything a lot noisier. But we were able to hear Jill, loud and clear, when she said the magic word:

“Jump!”

We did just that, hitting the tarmac hard. I rolled over and over and over, bruising portions of my anatomy I’d never noticed before. I heard the sound effects from Arlene doing her impression of a tennis ball. But I didn’t doubt this was the right way to disembark the plane; couldn’t risk a real landing. I got to my feet first. Jill was having trouble with her altitude. “Jesus, no!” shouted Arlene at the sight of Jill headed for a row of high rises.

“Lift, dammit, lift!” I spoke angrily into the air.

There wasn’t time for a proper prayer.

At the last second, bright, blinding flares erupted from under both wings, and the C-5 pulled sharply upward. A few seconds later we heard a roar so loud that it almost deafened us.

“What the hell?” Arlene asked, mouth hanging open.

“Outstanding!” I shouted, fisting the air. “She must have found the switch for the JATO rockets.” “JATO?”

“Jet-assisted takeoff!” I shouted. “They’re rockets on aircraft to allow them to do ultra-short-field take-offs.”

“I didn’t know that plane would have those.” “She probably didn’t either,” I said, so proud of her I wished she could hear me call her daughter the same way Albert had.

We watched until Jill became a dark speck in the sky, circling until we could get the field down. We tucked and ran, jogging all the way to the huge Disney building; the Disney logo at the top was shot up—somebody’d been using it for target practice. “Ready?” I asked.

“Always.”

I took a deep breath; pistols drawn, we popped the door and slid inside.

My God, what a wave of nostalgia! It was like old times again … back on Phobos, sliding around corners, hunting those zombies!

Up the stairwells—couldn't trust the lifts . . , I mean the elevators. Any minute, I knew I'd run into a hell-prince—and me without my trusty rocket launcher. Thank God, I didn't.

We played all our old games: cross fire, ooze-barrel-blow, even rile-the-critters. The last was the most fun: you get zombies and spinys so pissed, they munch each other alive.

Every floor we visited, we looked for that damned equipment. Nada. We climbed higher and higher; I began to get the strong feeling that we'd find the field generator way, way up, fortieth floor, all the way at the top.

It'd be just our luck.

We took Sig-Cows off'n the first two zombies we killed; better than the pistols, even though they were still just 10mm. The next one had a beautiful, wonderful shotgun. I'd take it, even if it was a fascist pump-action.

"Like old times," I said.

"Back on Deimos," she agreed.

"They die just as easily. I like my new toy." "Hold your horses, Fly Taggart," she said. "Haven't you forgotten something?"

"Like what?"

"A certain wager."

No sooner did she mention the bet than I did indeed remember. There was only one thing to do. Change the subject: "Those zombies were probably the least of our troubles, Arlene. We can settle this later—" "No way, Fly! I jumped out of a plane for you, and you're gonna pay your damn bet." When she got like this there was nothing to do but surrender. All the demonic forces of hell were like child's play compared to welshing on a bet with Arlene Sanders. "Well, now that you mention it, I do have a vague recollection," I lied. "And that Sig-Cow looks like a mighty fine weapon at that."

"Good," she said. "You take the Sig-Cow. The shotgun is mine."

We resolved this dispute at just about the right moment, because a fireball exploded over our heads. We were under bombardment by imps. Now the new weapons would receive a literal baptism of fire. Blowing away the spiny bastards, up the fifth floor stairwell, I turned a corner and found myself nose-to-nose with another Clyde. This close, there was no question: it looked exactly the same as the one we'd killed in the alley in Riverside, the same as the two who'd disarmed us getting on the plane. There was no question now: they were, indeed, genetically engineered. The aliens had finally made their breakthrough … God help the human race. He raised his .30 caliber, belt-fed, etc., etc.; but we had the drop on him. He never knew what hit him—well, it was a hail of bullets and Arlene's buckshot, and he probably knew that; you know what I mean! But now I had my own weapon; she looked envious … but she'd had her pick. The bet was paid. As a final treat, thirty-seven floors up—Jesus, was I getting winded! I felt like an old man—we were attacked by a big, floating, familiar old pumpkin. It hissed. It made faces. It spat ball lightning at us. I spat a stream of .30 caliber machine-gun bullets back at it, popping it like a beach ball. It spewed all over the room, spraying that blue ichor it uses for blood.

"Jesus, Fly," said my partner in crime, "I'm going to lose my hearing if this keeps up."

"What?"

"That machine gun! It's almost as loud as Jill and her jets."

"What's that?" I asked, grinning. I was delighted with the results of my belt-fed baby.

She gave a "playful" punch on the arm, my old buddy. I yelped in pain.

"Where's an uninjured place on your body?" she asked.

"That's a very good question. I think tumbling down the airstrip eliminated all of those." "Same here," she said. "But you can still make a great pumpkin pie." She kicked at the disgusting remains on the ground.

"Shall we find the top of the mouse house?" I suggested.

"After you, Fly."

In battlefield conditions, a proper gentleman goes ahead of the lady. If she asks, anyway. I was happy to oblige; but the nose of my machine gun actually preceded both of us.

At the very top we found a prize.

The door wasn't even locked. Inside was a room full of computers hooked into a new collection of alien biotech. This stuff gave off a stench, and some of it made mewling sounds like an injured animal. I wished Jill could be with us, plotting new ways of becoming a technovivisectionist.

"Got to be it," said Arlene.

I had trouble making out her words, not because my hearing was impaired, but because of the noise level. My machine gun contributed a good portion of it. So did Arlene's shotgun. And there were several explosions. A nice fanfare as we blew away unsuspecting imps and zombies tending the equipment. I picked up a fiberglass baton off the body of an ex-zombie guard and used it to bar the door. I expected more playmates along momentarily. The idea didn't even bother me; not so long as I could buy us some time.

Arlene waved the smoke away and began fiddling with the controls on the main console. She frantically started flipping one push-switch after another, looking for the one that would kill the field. "There has to be a way of doing this," she said, "or finding out if we've already done it.

"What makes you so sure?"

"Well, what if the aliens wanted to fly to Hawaii?" I nodded. "I can just see a pinkie in one of those Hawaiian shirts."

"Damn! I wish we had Jill and Ken with us." "Defeats the whole purpose, A.S. They're ready and waiting, forty thousand up, ready to blow for the islands as soon as we cut the bloody field." "Most of the switches require a psi-connection to activate, and I can't do that!"

By now there was a huge contingent pounding on the door. The fiberglass bar was holding them … so far. These sounds did not improve Arlene's psychological state or aid the difficult work she was trying to do.

"I'm not getting it," she said. "I'm close, but I'm not getting it. Damn, damn, damn …" "Is there anything I can do?"

"Hold the door. Hold the door! I'm sure there's one special button, but how will I know it even if I find it?"

As if to mock her, the entire panel went dark right then. She looked up and saw …

Me. Me, her buddy. Fly Taggart, technical dork, first-class. In my hand I held a gigantic electrical cord that I'd sliced in half with my commando knife. I knew that knife would come in handy one day. "When in doubt, yank it out," I said with a smile. She tried to laugh but was too tired for any sound to come out. "Did you learn that in VD class?" she asked.

I was saved from answering her because the door started to give way under the onslaught. Then the shred of a feeble plan crept into my brain. I ran across to the windows and smashed them open.

We were forty stories high, looking straight down on concrete, but it seemed better to open the windows than leave them closed.

"We took the energy wall down, at least," I said over my shoulder. "Jill's got to notice it's gone and tread air for Hawaii."

Arlene nodded, bleak even in victory. She was thinking of Albert … I didn't need alien psionics to know that. "The War Techies will track her as an 'unknown rider,'" added Arlene bleakly, "and they'll scramble some jets; they should be able to make contact and talk her down."

"Would you say the debt is paid?"

I didn't have to specify which debt. Arlene considered for a long time. "Yeah," she said at last, "it's paid."

"Evens?"

"Evens."

"Great. Got a hot plan to talk us down?" I asked my buddy.

She shook her head. I had a crazy wish that before Albert was blinded, and before Arlene and I found ourselves in this cul-de-sac, I'd played Dutch uncle to the two love birds, complete with blessings and un-wanted advice.

But somehow this did not seem the ideal moment to suggest that Arlene seriously study the Mormon faith, if she really loved good old Albert. A sermon on why it was better to have some religion, any religion, lay dormant in my mind.

Also crossing my mind was another sermon, on the limitations of the atheist viewpoint, right before your mortal body is ripped to shreds. Bad taste, especially if you delivered

it to someone with only precious seconds left to come up with a hot plan. She shook her head. “There’s no way,” she began, and then paused. “Unless …”

“Yes?” I asked, trying not to let the sound of a hundred slavering monsters outside the door add panic to the atmosphere.

Arlene stared at the door, at the console, then out the window. She went over to the window like she had all the time in the world and looked straight down. Then up. For some reason, she looked up. She faced me again, wearing a big, crafty, Arlene Sanders smile. “You are not going to believe this, Fly Taggart, but I think—I think I have it. I know how to get us down and get us to Hawaii to join Albert.” “And Jill,” I added. I nodded back, convinced she’d finally cracked. “Great idea, Arlene. We could use a vacation from all this pressure.” “You don’t believe me.”

“You’re right. I don’t believe you.”

Arlene smiled slyly. She was using the early-worm-that-got-the-bird smile. “Flynn Taggart. .. bring me some duct tape from the toolbox, an armload of computer-switch wiring, and the biggest, goddamned boot you can find!”